

Critical Fiction, Fictional Criticism.
**Christine Brooke-Rose's experimentalism between theory and
practice**

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PhD
The University of Edinburgh
Academic Year 2007/2008

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the mature development of Christine Brooke-Rose's experimental fiction, taking particular interest in the exemplary texts *Between* and *Thru*. I argue that these texts both critically refigure and respond to central aspects of the poststructuralist debate. I investigate *Between* and *Thru* specifically in relation to the theories of Irigaray, Barthes (in the case of *Between*), Derrida and Kristeva (in the case of *Thru*), demonstrating how the two novels develop these theorists' core tenets in an innovative manner that critics have failed to recognise up to this point.

Starting – in the first chapter – from Brooke-Rose's first four conventional novels, I explore the issues which lie at the basis of the experimental direction she comes to take, and investigate her first two experimental novels, *Out* and *Such*. The second chapter explores *Between* in relation to the debate over language and identity, whereas the third chapter investigates the way the novel addresses the gender issue as related to language. The fourth chapter concentrates on *Thru*'s narrative technique in order to better elucidate – in the fifth and sixth chapters – how the novel succeeds in resolving both the tension generated by the notion of language as linked to the representation of an ontologically unstable reality, and the narrative anxiety deriving from the dispute around the death of the author and the ontological status of characters. The seventh chapter offers an overview of Brooke-Rose's fictional output after *Thru*, while the eighth and final chapter aims at further positioning Brooke-Rose in the context of the postmodern debate, showing how her work represents a countertendency to the nihilist attitude engendered by the major critical tenets of postmodernism.

The thesis thus sheds light on the importance and role of Brooke-Rose as a highly innovative intellectual figure, while rethinking some of the main literary implications of the postmodernist debate.

Declaration of Originality

I, Ida Maria Samperi, declare that this thesis has been composed by me. It is my own work and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Information derived from the work of others has been acknowledged in the text.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Ida Maria Samperi".

To life and to the languages that life speaks.

To myself, which is not only me.

To my family and Giovanni.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the supervision of Dr. Aaron Kelly during this work. I thank him for his understanding, assistance and encouragement. Special thanks to Professor Maria Grazia Nicolosi, who inspired my passion for Brooke-Rose's works since the beginning and has always been dear to my heart. My thankfulness also goes to Professor Mary Orr, for her precious support at a time when it was most needed, to Dr. Simon Malpas, for offering me his advice and helping me to clarify my thinking on Lacan, and to Hilary Campbell for her valuable and caring contribution.

Thanks to the University of Edinburgh, which helped me realise a dream I could not have lived in my own country, and to The University of Edinburgh Development Trust, which gave me the chance to interview Christine Brooke-Rose, an experience which has enriched me both intellectually and spiritually.

I am forever indebted to my parents, Angelo and Virginia, for their continual understanding and implicit support.

Unlimited gratitude goes above all to Giovanni, for being *always there*, standing by my side and carefully listening to me, for his understanding, infinite patience and continual support, love and strength.

List of Abbreviations

- LL.** Brooke-Rose, Christine. *The Languages of Love*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1957.
- ST.** ---. *The Sycamore Tree*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1958.
- DD.** ---. *The Dear Deceit*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1960.
- MM.** ---. *The Middlemen: A Satire*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1961.
- O.** ---. *Out*. *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus; Four Novels: Out, Such, Between, Thru*. Manchester and New York: Carcanet, 1986. 7-198.
- S.** ---. *Such*. *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus*. 199-390.
- B.** ---. *Between*. *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus*. 391-575.
- T.** ---. *Thru*. *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus*. 577-742.
- A.** ---. *Amalgamemnon*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1984.
- X.** ---. *Xorandor*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1986.
- V.** ---. *Verbivore*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1990.
- TX.** ---. *Textermination*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1991.
- R.** ---. *Remake*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1996.
- N.** ---. *Next*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1998.
- SS.** ---. *Subscript*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1999.
- LEO.** ---. *Life, End Of*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2006.

“Un testo è un testo solo se nasconde al primo sguardo, al primo venuto, la legge della sua composizione e la regola del suo gioco.”

Jacques Derrida, *La Farmacia di Platone*.

Preface

My interest in Christine Brooke-Rose's fiction has been firstly elicited by the great linguistic understanding which distinctively shapes both her narrative technique and issues. The author's deep concern with language, with its mechanisms and creative possibilities, has led her to highly innovative linguistic experiments and to the exploration of language as constitutive of identity in terms of fictional practice. For Brooke-Rose, not only does the language spoken by individuals "determine" or, to say it better, "shape" the reality they live in, but also *the way* in which they use a language is strictly related to the forging of their own identity. As the author herself puts it, a language is "not only a language to use, but a language to think in" (Hayman and Cohen 10).

Brooke-Rose has always been deemed a "difficult" writer and this supposed difficulty has marginalised her from a wider reading public. One of the reasons for her "obscurity" is that in each of her novels her experimenting has different connotations, exploring the possibilities of different narrative devices. The intriguing effect of Brooke-Rose's works derives from her inventive writing technique, which disrupts the traditional patterns critics generally rely upon in interpreting a text. Not only has Brooke-Rose always succeeded in eluding any label critics have tried to attach to her fictional practice, but at all times she has also had a critical approach to any *rigidly held* labelling system within literary criticism.

I find it particularly bewildering to see that Brooke-Rose's novels and critical works have not been reprinted – apart from *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus* edition in 1986 – and therefore are not obtainable in bookshops across Great Britain. Most strikingly, when her latest novel, *Life, End Of*, was published by Carcanet in 2006, it still was not accessible in bookshops in Edinburgh and the only way to obtain it was to order it from the publisher or through the internet. Her latest collection of essays, *Invisible Author: Last Essays* (2002), was published in the United States and, again, is unavailable in the bookshops of the United Kingdom. My wish to contribute to the knowledge of such an innovative author stems from the distress I feel about the scant consideration Brooke-Rose has both among the general public and within the University syllabus. Instead of being appreciated for her

ground-breaking and constantly humorous narrative solutions, she is often seen as austere, obscure, forbidding and inaccessible.

In the first chapter, after an account of the author's life, I will evaluate her first four novels and demonstrate how, though still conventionally structured, these early works already bear the most significant features of her future fictional creations in an embryonic stage. I will subsequently consider why and how Brooke-Rose starts developing such features in new directions, exploring her first two experimental novels, *Out* and *Such*. I will then delineate the French panorama Brooke-Rose came in contact with when she moved to France in 1968, and take into consideration the postmodernist critical and creative literary output which flourished during the sixties and seventies. This will serve the purpose of setting a wider context for the understanding of Brooke-Rose's literary practice. Contemporary writers whose creative output stands in a relation of analogy to Brooke-Rose's work – in terms of issues and/or technique – will be considered, while the major literary influences evident in the author's work, in particular Ezra Pound and Samuel Beckett, will be traced. Finally, I will outline the issue of her reception, the major innovative characteristics of her narrative technique, and clarify the way this thesis proposes to contribute to an original understanding of her work.

The second and third chapters will investigate *Between*. In chapter two, I will first focus on the novel's unconventional technique, by means of which its issues are presented and explored. I will analyse the distinctive way in which language is present in the text as linked to its central character's existential condition, and therefore the way the novel inscribes itself into the theoretical debate of the time. In chapter three, I will readdress the novel's language as connected to the gender of its central character, and show how the latter succeeds in remoulding language to acquire patterns capable of expressing her own identity.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters will focus on Brooke-Rose's *Thru*. Starting – in chapter four – from its technical features which are inextricably linked to the topics tackled, I will demonstrate – in chapters five and six – how *Thru* is a more self-conscious engagement with, and playful pathway out of, the major theorists of the contemporary critical debate. I will expand on the *positive* subversion the text brings about, showing how the author succeeds in overcoming the sources of tension

generated by the literary debate of the time, reshaping them for the original construction of her fictional work. *Thru* posits itself as a practical and positive *exit* out of that very debate's dead-ends, thus attaining the status of "critical fiction" or "fictional criticism" and representing a countertendency within the postmodernist literary trend.

The seventh chapter will delineate Brooke-Rose's fictional output subsequent to *Thru* by way of providing a more inclusive account of her literary career but also, most specifically, of better supporting my choice of concentrating my dissertation specifically on the author's first tetralogy, and particularly on *Between* and *Thru*.

I will conclude my thesis by first showing how the linguistic scepticism endorsed by Brooke-Rose's two major literary influences – Pound and Beckett – is reworked in her work into a positive affirmation of the play of language and into a reaffirmation of language's referential value. I will then further position Brooke-Rose in the context of the postmodern debate, and show how her work distinguishes itself from the negativism and the "crisis thinking" of some of the main critical tenets of postmodernism. While a detailed analysis of the postmodern debate would be beyond the scope of my dissertation, I will concentrate only on those aspects of the debate which will help me support my claim of a countertendential facet in Brooke-Rose's novels. Specifically, I will consider the dangers implicit in the more than prolific "generative machine" (Connor 16) of the postmodern debate, as well as the risky concept of nihilism which the anti-foundationalist aspect of those theories seems to call forth. I will thus demonstrate that Brooke-Rose's writing practice does something more than simply embodying the widely shared postmodernist assumptions of impossibility of representation and collapse of metanarratives. This will serve the purpose of showing how Brooke-Rose actively contributes to the critical debate on postmodernism, producing what can be defined as "critical fiction" or "fictional criticism".

My thesis' specific focus on *Between* and *Thru* – an in particular on *Thru* – derives from the fact that these are key-texts, published in a moment when the poststructuralist debate was reaching its theoretical climax but its inherent dangers were not yet envisaged. Apart from being exemplary texts by a writer in the process of a transition of style and technique, they can be considered as the *epitome* of

Brooke-Rose's countertendential experimentalism. While playfully addressing contemporary critical theories, in fact, they *critically deal* with their implications, already pointing out their possible outshoots and implicit risks. *Thru*, in particular, offers a matchless illustration of Brooke-Rose's countertendency. As I will show, it *anticipates* issues which were to be at the centre of the theoretical debate only many years after the novel was published. For this reason, *Thru*, more than any other novel by Brooke-Rose, can be defined as a unique instance of "fictional criticism" or "critical fiction".

The abundant employment of quotations in my work is not intended to be gratuitous, but rather a way of better showing the direct correlation of Brooke-Rose's texts with the critical theories they address. Even though my aim is not to explain such shared readings, I found myself needing to recall directly many of their crucial points in order to demonstrate more clearly their express relationship to Brooke-Rose's practice.

Among the authors who deal with Brooke-Rose's writing, those I am most indebted to are Sarah Birch and Michela Canepari-Labib, who both provided extensive critical analyses of the author's *oeuvre*, Maria Del Sapio Garbero, who gave a crucial interpretation of her work, and Ellen G. Friedman and Richard Martin, who edited a collected volume of fundamental importance for the understanding of Brooke-Rose's fiction.

As regards the methodological approach followed, I have availed myself mostly of poststructuralist theories and assessed Brooke-Rose's practice in relation to them. However, it needs to be said that her narrative seems to forever *exceed* any set method of analysis. I have, therefore, often used a "free-ranging" methodology, contemporaneously benefiting from both structuralist, poststructuralist, and feminist theories, varyingly disposing of different concepts which could help illuminate the salient features of her *irremediably chameleonic* work. In fact, as will clearly emerge in the course of my disquisition, Brooke-Rose's fictional practice is by no means reducible to any single literary trend. If the *nouveau roman* gave a strong input to her experimentalism, and if poststructuralism necessarily influenced its issues and technique, the author's playful texts never fail to offer new and creative pathways which, while engaging with the contemporary critical debate, find languages and

forms that avoid the dead-ends and introspections of some of its theories. While interweaving many aspects of the intellectual climate of the time and putting into practice its speculations, Brooke-Rose's work always remains defiantly original and independent, providing a more enabling, refreshing and restorative passageway out of theoretical blind alleys.

Chapter 1

Introduction and early experimentalism in context

Most of the biographical material available on Brooke-Rose is to be found disseminated in reference works such as *World Authors* (Wakeman), *British Novelists* (Levitt), *Contemporary Novelists* (Hall 1976), *An Encyclopaedia of English Women Writers* (Schlueter), and *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (Shattock). Within the various critical essays which deal with her *oeuvre*, one finds only small fragments concerning her life. Among the critical works dealing with Brooke-Rose's overall literary career, Sarah Birch (Birch) and Ellen G. Friedman (Friedman 1995) treat the topic of her life's experiences in an extensive way. However, if compared to the enormous amount of information offered by critics on most of the contemporary novelists' lives, in the case of Brooke-Rose one has to cope with a relative lack of detailed data.

The cause of these circumstances lies not only in the scarce interest raised by her work and figure among readers and critics, but also in the author's fundamental resistance to biographers' queries. In other words, I find this situation to be, to a certain extent, symptomatic of Brooke-Rose's scepticism about the crucial importance of a writer's life-experiences for the understanding and analysis of their literary work. Brooke-Rose has always been reluctant not only to give interviews, but also and particularly to supply extended information about her own life, insisting on giving the *Text* for its own sake primary importance. In this belief, she concurs with the position of both New Criticism and poststructuralism, movements which have deeply influenced her literary perspective. New Criticism was in fact the most influential critical approach during her University years, while she plunged into poststructuralism in France at the beginning of her academic career. Although very different in their approach to a literary text, these two theoretical trends concurred in "rejecting" the author, considering the knowledge of authors' lives as no longer basic to the understanding of their work and deeming the text worth analysing in and for itself.

Even though I share to some extent Brooke-Rose's idea of the predominant importance of the textual analysis, I shall nevertheless provide a survey of her life. Although I do not intend to establish a basic relation of cause and effect between her

life and her writing, I believe some circumstances of Brooke-Rose's life have contributed to her literary orientation. In this respect, it is important to note how even one of the most "textually-based" critical theorists, Jacques Derrida, does not merely look at the written text as a *per se* phenomenon, but expands the concept of *Text* so as to include its outside "context" within it. The term *Text* comes to designate the whole tissue subtending human experience.

If the text is always already embedded in a context, an overview of what we know about Brooke-Rose's personal experiences would help the reader put her in "context". Likewise, the innovative characteristics of her work can be better appreciated in the light of the cultural atmosphere she lived in. Moreover, it seems to me worth collecting the available information about the author's lifetime and presenting it here to so as to contribute in some way to the increase of knowledge about her figure in general.

Christine Frances Evelyn Brooke-Rose was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on January, 16, 1923. Her mother, Evelyn Blanche Brooke, was half Swiss and half American. Her father, Alfred Northbrook Rose, was English. Christine was the younger of two daughters. Her parents' marriage dissolved when she was still a child and Christine and her mother went to live with her grandparents in Brussels. Indeed, she moved several times between Switzerland, Belgium and England, speaking alternatively French and English. She became perfectly bilingual and could speak German as well, but felt that French was actually her first language. After her father's death (1934), at the age of 13 she was permanently sent to Folkestone, where she attended school. Brooke-Rose remained in England throughout the war, during which period she joined the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force, working at Bletchley Park as an intelligence officer, translating intercepted messages from German into English. On May, 16, 1944 she married Rodney Ian Shirley Bax, whom she met through her work. They divorced in January 1948, and their marriage was later annulled. Meanwhile, she had been attending Somerville College, Oxford, where she studied English Philology and Medieval Literature. She took her BA in 1949 and her MA in 1953.

On February, 13, 1948, Brooke-Rose married Jerzy Peterkiewicz, a Polish poet and novelist. She went to London University where she completed her PhD with a

dissertation on Medieval French and English literature. In her doctoral thesis, Brooke-Rose analysed in particular the grammatical aspects of metaphor in Old French and Middle English poetry, comparing the two languages and highlighting the influence of French usage over English rehearsal during the Middle Ages. Shortly after finishing her thesis in 1954, Brooke-Rose published *Gold*, a book of poetry. From 1956 to 1968 she worked in London as a freelance literary journalist, regularly writing reviews and essays for important weekly publications such as *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, *The New Statesman* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Her first novel, *The Languages of Love*, was published in 1957. Sarah Birch informs us that the author wrote it “as a form of therapy” (Birch 1) to oppose the stress deriving from a near-fatal illness which hit her husband in 1956. In 1958 she published *A Grammar of Metaphor*, a critical work written as an outgrowth of her doctoral thesis. It is a survey on the use of metaphor in fifteen English poets, ranging from Chaucer to Dylan Thomas. In the same year her second novel, *The Sycamore Tree*, was also published. Two other novels followed, *The Dear Deceit* in 1960, and *The Middlemen: A Satire* in 1961. Brooke-Rose’s first four novels are amusing and humorous, yet still relatively conventional. In 1962 Brooke-Rose suffered from a serious illness, which was to last about two years and made it necessary to submit to kidney surgery. After her illness, in 1964, Brooke-Rose published her first experimental novel, *Out*, which she had been writing during her period of recovery from surgery. In 1966 she wrote the novel *Such* and in 1968 another novel, *Between*, was published.

In 1968, Brooke-Rose separated from her husband and accepted an invitation to teach at the Université de Paris VIII at Vincennes. The newly created institution had grown out of the 1968 student revolution. It was an open-admission University whose foundation was due in particular to Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida. Invited by Cixous, Brooke-Rose worked as a teacher of Anglo-American Literature in the English department of the University for twenty years. She also taught courses on Literary Theory, Linguistics and Translation. During her academic career, she was occasionally invited as visiting lecturer to some American Universities. As a professor, Brooke-Rose was able to concentrate on her fiction only during summer breaks, when she also travelled extensively.

In 1970 Brooke-Rose published a collection of short stories, *Go When You See The Green Man Walking*. In 1971 and 1976 she published two studies on Pound, respectively *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* and *A Structural Analysis of Pound's Usura Canto*. In 1975 her novel *Thru* was released, and in 1981 she wrote *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, a collection of essays analysing different narrative techniques in heterogeneous sorts of fiction. From 1981 to 1982, she was briefly married to Claude Brooke, her cousin, who was a physicist. Nine years elapsed between the publication of *Thru* and that of the novel *Amalgamemnon* (1984), which was followed by *Xorandor* in 1986.

Brooke-Rose retired in 1988 and went to live in the South of France, first in Les Maquignons, and then in Cabrières d'Avignon, where she currently lives. Since her retirement she has published her other six novels, in chronological order *Verbivore* (1990), *Textermination* (1991), *Remake* (1996), *Next* (1998), *Subscript* (1999) and *Life, End Of* (2006), as well as two collections of critical essays, *Stories, Theories and Things* (1991), which contains essays inspired by the structural analysis of literary texts as well as general discussions on literary theory, and *Invisible Author: Last Essays* (2002), in which she looks back at her career and for the first time openly describes some of the aspects and addresses some of the theoretical implications of *her own* narrative technique.

Brooke-Rose's earliest four novels were almost conventional realistic works. They were generally acknowledged by the critics and literary establishment, and earned her a reasonable literary reputation. However, while writing them the author became gradually unsatisfied with the conventions of realistic fiction and her narrative practice underwent a basic shift which would lead to her experimental phase. In the essay "Self-Confrontation and the Writer" (1977), Brooke-Rose distances herself from her identity as author, calling it "John" and reproaching him for having paid too much attention to the accepted standards and public opinion: "The rat race. The mousetrap in the House of Fame or Fiction. John is eager to please. John is built by the House [...] John and I, flattered at first by the sweet smell of success" (Brooke-Rose 1977 132)¹. Her landing on experimentalism clearly

¹ Brooke-Rose clearly employs the Chomskyan "John", i.e. the name Chomsky uses for many of his linguistic examples (Cf. in particular Chomsky 1957 and 1965). Moreover, the male ascription seems

appears with the new solutions she adopts in *Out* and *Such*, is further developed in *Between* and reaches its full expression in *Thru*. The change of direction took place gradually and although strictly related to the cultural panorama the author came in contact with in France at the end of the sixties, it is not to be entirely associated with it. In fact, Brooke-Rose started experimenting *before* going to France and indeed I believe that although still conventional in most of their aspects, it is possible to detect in her first four novels the mark of her later experimentalism. It is as if they already presented in vitro most of the main characteristics of Brooke-Rose's later works.

Let us therefore consider her earlier fictional works and see how her later innovative solutions were already paving their way through them. We will then focus on the various reasons which precipitated Brooke-Rose's landing on experimentalism and led to her two first experimental works.

The protagonist of Brooke-Rose's first novel, *The Languages of Love*, is Julia Grampion. She bears some external resemblance to her creator, as she is a recent PhD graduate in Medieval studies and lives in London. Julia finds herself facing two dilemmas and for each of them two different solutions are possible. On the professional side, she has to choose between a scholarly career as a university lecturer and a much more exciting life as a novelist. On the personal side, Julia has to decide between Paul Brodrick, whom she loves but cannot marry, since she is divorced and he is a practising Catholic, and Bernard Reeves, who attracts her physically but whom she does not love because he is selfish and dishonest, besides being married.

In both cases, the choice Julia is presented with is to be made between what can be defined the "serious" and the "frivolous": the first is initially viewed as tedious and unoriginal, whereas the second is presented as attractive and interesting. In the end, Julia will realise that, if the frivolous precludes the serious, the serious does not exclude the interesting and the creative, so that the initially mutually exclusive options become complementary aspects of the newly-found unity of the protagonist: she will renounce the selfish, physical attraction for Bernard, become a practising Catholic and embark on her academic career.

to hint at the fact that most of the contemporary well-accepted writers were men who wrote in accordance with conventional standards and public opinions.

Although conventionally structured and narrated, *The Languages of Love* already presents one of the most outstanding characteristics of Brooke-Rose's future experimental works, i.e. the concern with language, the interest in language as a live tool, a creative instrument, a "process" and, together with it, the tendency to see personal identity and social dealings in terms of language.

The multiple layers of meaning the novel presents, the philological, the romantic and the religious, correspond to different "languages" or "levels" of language Julia learns to speak. Considering in particular the philology she comes to appreciate, it is interesting to note how, if at first she sees its jargon as lifeless and unexciting, she later comes to perceive it as "in a constant state of flux" (LL 67), thus becoming "interested in language as a process, not a thing or an essence" (LL 66). This revelation renders her conscious of her vocation: "Even phonology seemed worthwhile now [...] and the job [...] seemed interesting and desirable" (LL 69).

In this novel, we also notice the constant use of puns, which, from now on, will never leave Brooke-Rose's writing. Julia's linguistic transgressions, her linguistic games, such as poly-semantic words and phrases, are initially seen as indicative of her lack of moral integrity, since she employs them in order to drop serious topics, as a way of escaping seriousness. Moreover, as Birch points out, in religious terms punning suggests sin,

the covert substitution of one meaning for another by a linguistic sleight of hand is practiced by Milton's Adam and Eve after the Fall, indicating that they have sundered the prelapsarian unity of divine order. (Birch 28)

In my own view, linguistic transgression is here at first negatively connoted by the author and amorally used by Julia because of her ignorance of the "languages of love". However, when she begins to apprehend them, she perceives that there might be another way of employing linguistic play, a morally positive and creative one, "the true humour of life" (LL 147), as she calls it. Indeed. Brooke-Rose's use of linguistic jokes will bear an absolutely positive connotation in her subsequent works.

The central character of Brooke-Rose's second fictional work, *The Sycamore Tree*, is the fashion journalist Nina Jackson. Married to Gael, an American novelist who teaches philosophy at Oxford and is specialising in theories of perception, she loves her husband but is physically attracted to Howard Cutting, a man she otherwise dislikes because of his dishonesty and moral baseness. After Nina capitulates and

commits adultery with Howard, she falls prey to a breakdown. She eventually repents and reconciles with her husband. A series of complicated events and plot devices lead Zoltan, a Hungarian poet (and, like Nina, a “split” personality), to shoot Nina, who dies.

As in the previous novel, the problem the heroine has to face is that of a split identity and a double, contrasting desire. However, if Julia, in *The Languages of Love*, goes through her “apprenticeship”, “learns the languages of love”, makes her choice and finds her unity, Nina’s status is much more unstable at its basis. To begin with, Catholicism, which was seen as a salvaging anchor in the previous novel, is no longer presented as a solution to the fragmentation of the self. In addition, the philosophy of indeterminacy appears as a background in the novel to undermine the very basic assumption of an objective perception of reality, challenging its ontological status.

The novel questions the issue of reality vs. fictional representation: the ontological status of fictional characters is uncertain, their verisimilitude dismissed. I find this choice extremely significant of Brooke-Rose’s gradually changing attitude towards fiction. Rather than coherent and realistic representations of individuals, characters are treated as discursive instances, merely serving for discourses to *pass through* them. No longer complete representations of real individualities, they become hollow conveyors of impulses and ideas. For instance, Nina is described as “one of those women who make sweet, devoted wives to sweet devoted husbands, but to whom most men find it impossible to talk without making some crude reference to her physical attractions” (ST 24).

Already at this point in Brooke-Rose’s career, the idea of fiction as representing reality begins to weaken in her writing practice. From this moment on, her novels will become more and more conscious of their status as mere fictional constructs, through which an ontologically dubious “reality” is mediated. Moreover, anticipating the metafictional representation of *Thru* and its mix of narrative levels, Gael is writing a novel which bears the same title as Brooke-Rose’s novel and the work is significantly described as an analysis of the ontological status of reality. Even more revealing is the fact that at the end of the novel Gael, who is an atheist, lives and decides to rewrite his novel, whereas Nina, who is Catholic, dies. What

therefore survives is the fiction within the fiction, whose status of non-reality has been wholly recognised as such.

Another important feature the novel presents is one we have already appreciated in the previous text: the use of linguistic humour. Nina jokes in fact with the possibility of multiple meaning formulae, such as when a waiter in a restaurant asks her “How many are you, madam, one?” and she is tempted to answer “There are at least a hundred of me today” (ST 218). Consequently, it can be said that in *The Sycamore Tree* two of the main features of Brooke-Rose’s experimentalism are to be found already: the focus on language and its playfulness, and the awareness of the fictionality of fiction as related to a dubious ontology.

The central character of Brooke-Rose’s third novel, *The Dear Deceit*, Philip Hayley, embarks on a search after the life and personality of his dead father, Alfred Northbrook Hayley. The latter turns out to have been a spendthrift who depleted his entire existence deceiving other people and exploiting their work, to the point of having adopted numerous false identities throughout his life. However, discovering the complete “truth” about his father’s life turns out to be impossible for Philip, who eventually mingles reality and invention in order to tell his story. He realises that making an account of someone’s personality and private experiences necessarily implies a process of distortion and re-creation. The remembered past will not be the “truth”, but only an authoritarian act of interpretation. Just like fictional narration, to remember means to *reformulate* the past: “Some call it truth, some creation, some fiction, history, memory or mere jingling of bells. Perhaps all these are one, beyond analysis” (DD 40). Narration is thus opposed to “reality”: the process of writing inevitably implies falsification. This notion is brought to its extreme consequences by the narrative technique, which disrupts the conventional linear account of facts and the causal logic of events. After the first two chapters, Northbrook’s life is in fact recorded backwards, each section further receding into the past, so that the reader is presented with the story of his life from his death to his childhood.

Another significant issue the novel presents is the way human behaviour is affected by fictional stereotypes. In 1959 Brooke-Rose had already explained how, in everyday life, people are in contact with what she defines as “signpost language” (Brooke-Rose 1959 45): the languages of novels, films and other media are made up

of clichés, where standard situations are continually presented as true, influencing our interpretation of life and determining our behaviour. In *The Dear Deceit*, Philip becomes aware of the role of “signpost language” and the mechanism for which we proceed according to the fictional stereotypes we are presented, applying false paradigms of action to our experiences. Philip’s conception of life is in fact initially governed by Victorian and Edwardian novelistic clichés, so that when he first apprehends that his father had been imprisoned, he takes for granted that he had committed a great and magnificent crime, “something on a grand scale, something melodramatic, like murder, something novelistic” (DD 29). Such expectations are destined to be frustrated as his father’s crimes have been only minor and trivial ones. Strictly related to the notion of narrative clichés is the treatment of literary references and quotations. These are really copious in the novel, and in most cases purposely placed within an improper context. The overflowing and inappropriate use of literary references seems to exemplify the way people parallel their own specific situations with literary paradigms, applying ready-for-usage thoughts to catalogue or pigeonhole their life’s circumstances, whereas they should distinguish the peculiarity and uniqueness of each experience and analyse its specificity by means of their own reason.

Along with Philip’s unfulfilled expectations, the reader’s assumptions are frustrated as well. The reader goes through the same backward process of investigation and discovery experienced by Philip, presupposing the existence of a significant, “originary” cause which motivates Alfred’s crimes, only to realise that there exists no extraordinary, determining driving force at the basis of his actions as he turns out to be just an insecure little boy.

It is clear how in *The Dear Deceit* many of the characteristics of Brooke-Rose’s later experimental production are already to be appreciated: the idea of identity as a “construct”, as a product of our system of representation which is ineluctably affected by the language we live in, the idea that representation always implies a process of distortion of what we think as “reality”, the disruption of a temporarily consequential plot and the procedure of frustrating the reader’s anticipations, of playing with the audience’s conventional expectations which are

based on traditional literary clichés. These will all be chief features of the author's novels henceforth.

The Middlemen: A Satire is the last of Brooke-Rose's "conventional" novels. As suggested by its subtitle, the novel is a satirical portrait of the contemporary social system, a bitter attack on the class of so-called middlemen, people who conform to society and profit by its rules. One of the two main characters of the novel is Serena, a psychoanalyst who constantly tries to keep herself under control and rationalizes every aspect of her life. Not only does she maintain to have settled all her unconscious desires, but also claims to be able to solve, through her work, other people's inner problems and contrasts between bodily drives and soul's desires. She thus embodies the perfect middleman, fully integrated into the social order, living in it and serving its aims. Serena is delineated in opposition to her twin sister Stella, who resists the domestication and constraints of society. Being the only character of the novel who is not a middleman, the only one which possesses an independent life-force, Stella survives the destruction of the middlemen class. Significantly enough, whereas the exponents of middlemanship (including Serena) die in a sudden volcanic eruption on a Greek island which takes place towards the end of the novel, Stella survives and is depicted, in its final scene, as unaware of her sister's death while adventuring into a new job.

However, it needs be pointed out that Serena and Stella seem to be complementary characters, in that they embody two opposite aspects of the same dissatisfaction with contemporary society. One can conform to social conventions and pretend to act in accordance with them or, inversely, one can oppose the widely accepted values of society but his/her resistance would only result into a troubled and unstable situation. In both cases, Brooke-Rose shows how contemporary moral values generate dissatisfaction in the individual.

By eliminating the major representative figures of middlemanship, Brooke-Rose seems to suggest that the class is doomed to self-destruction, whereas Stella still retains the possibility to free herself completely from that society. The end of the novel could be seen as a representation of a future apocalyptic ending of civilization. The volcano which suddenly erupts is at first said to be safe, as the last eruption was

a slow one which lasted six years, “just like the last war” (MM 207). The eruption is thus implicitly compared to a next world war, an unexpected and fatal one.

In *The Middlemen*, Brooke-Rose further develops the gradual disruption of traditional realist technique she had begun in her previous novels. The realistic mood of writing undergoes a breakdown as the subconscious narratorial comment is often inflated to the point of parody and the novel furnishes several examples of middlemanship without coherently linking them to one another. The notion of individual, unified identity is abandoned and satirised. Another feature the novel presents and which will constitute a significant characteristic of Brooke-Rose’s following narrative output is the mixture of various jargons: discourses drawn from different fields of knowledge, such as advertising slogans, psychoanalytic jargon or phrases from travel brochures are all fused together throughout the novel.

It can be therefore concluded that, although still conventional in most of their aspects, Brooke-Rose’s first four novels not only mark the author’s gradual dissatisfaction with conventional fiction and serve as rehearsal ground for her to be able to approach a fundamental reformulation of her writing, but also and most importantly they already bear, in embryonic stage, the main disruptive features (the “seeds”) of her following innovative creations.

Before analysing Brooke-Rose’s first two experimental novels, *Out* and *Such*, let us explore the diverse circumstances that lie at the basis of her rising dissatisfaction with traditional writing, and therefore of her new literary direction. The main experimental characteristics which will appear in *Out* and *Such* derive mostly by Brooke-Rose’s cognisance of the new scientific theories of uncertainty in physics – which undermined the scientific law of causality and foregrounded a subjective way of experiencing reality – and by her appreciation of the *nouveau roman*.

Already from the beginning of the century, different scientists had begun to undertake what was to be labelled as a revolution in modern science: “Science was actively engaged in redefining its aims and examining the means it employed to achieve them” (Birch 4). Traditional scientific methods were based on the formulation of universal rules derived from the observation of external phenomena, so that our experience of the material world would correspond to a given and

objective reality and be, through scientific language, objectively expressed in scientific formulae. Contrary to such traditional views, Einstein's Theory of Relativity (1915) started revolutionising the conception of the universe and reality. His theory undermined the claim of universal truths which could be discovered by science, for it demonstrated that the notions of space and time were not absolute, but rather interdependent on each other. The universe was no longer seen as static, and the measurement of time and space could vary according to the parameters of the experiment. In 1900, Max Planck formulated the basic principles of the Quantum Theory, and in 1926, Werner Heisenberg theorised the Uncertainty Principle. On the basis of the Uncertainty Principle, such scientists as Heisenberg, Schrödinger, and Dirac formulated the theory of Quantum Mechanics. The theory considered particles and waves as existing in a quantum state, i.e. a state where position and velocity were combined and interdependent. As a result, calculating once and for all either position or velocity of a particle was impossible. The theory thus introduced the concept of unpredictability in science: determining with certainty the result of a scientific experiment was no longer possible. In his work *Physics and Philosophy* (1958), Heisenberg illustrated how the discourse of science is a subjective reconstruction of the external phenomena by our mind. Scientific language is only a specific expression of natural language, and the pictures it creates in our mind "have only a vague connection with reality" (Heisenberg 181). The traditional conception of scientific language was thus turned upside down as the discourse of science became conscious of its distance from its object. The result was that scientists could no longer claim an objective knowledge of the world and had to accept that their understanding of "reality" was only the result of their subjective way of experiencing it.

This conceptual revolution in science had direct consequences for literary criticism, as many debates originated around the possible link between science and literature. Although different in their approach to a literary work, both structuralist and poststructuralist theories assumed that language is basic to our understanding of "reality" and that we, as mere "tools" of language, are programmed by discourses to construct our realities according to their stipulations and forms. As a consequence, the human subject is no longer seen as the "maker" of meaning, but rather as a

“product” of language. It is not the subject which generates meaning, but it is rather language which generates the subject. Our comprehension of the external world passes through a variety of linguistic systems, each system having its own conventions. Therefore, what we call “truth” is relative to the conventions of the specific domain in question. As a direct result, scientific and poetic knowledge, science and literature, are not different in status: they only represent different uses of the same linguistic system.

However, structuralism and poststructuralism crucially disagreed on whether language is knowably fixed as an object of science (structuralism), or rather unstably indeterminate and slippery (poststructuralism). From this basic difference between the two critical approaches, opposite conclusions ensued about the relation between literature and science. For structuralists, literature is a form of science, and criticism can develop a scientific analysis of texts, a “science of literature”, whereas for poststructuralists, science is a form of literature and scientific language can be employed in literature.

Brooke-Rose showed a deep interest in the relationship between language and “truth”, language and reality: in agreement with structuralism and poststructuralism, she assumed that reality *is* language. In “Dynamic Gradients”, an article about the relation of the new scientific theories to literature, Brooke-Rose identifies Heisenberg’s theory of uncertainty as the cause of the polyvalent way of seeing external reality, which nowadays everyone experiences and according to which something is neither true nor false, but has only a certain degree of possibility of being true. Literature, she declares, must “attempt to evolve a language that corresponds to what we know of empirical reality today” (Brooke-Rose 1965 92), exploring the implications of the uncertainty principle for our relation to the world. Man is now faced with what Brooke-Rose will later call “a philosophy of indeterminacy and a multivalent logic” (Brooke-Rose 1981 7). The once steady and fixed reality now appears as a construction of language, subject to linguistic constraints and indeterminate. As a consequence, the fixed meaning of the realist novel can no longer be tolerated. Since the reality of everyday life, influenced by the new theories, has changed, the conventional novel is no longer able to express this reality,

People can go on writing the nineteenth-century novel until the year 2000 if they want, but that won't alter the fact it's dead, and that you are simply pouring into old forms a reality that has completely changed. We now have to evolve new forms to suit this new reality. (Hall 1970 9)

The same need for new forms had been already envisaged by the exponents of the *nouveau roman*. For them, as well as for Brooke-Rose, the modern novel should explore the possibilities of language in light of the contemporary new reality. In 1963, Alain Robbe-Grillet publishes a series of "reflections on literature" (Robbe-Grillet 9) which was to be considered the manifesto of the *nouveau roman*. Translated in English as *For a New Novel* in 1965, the essays delineate the main reasons and issues behind the practice of a new mode of writing. Robbe-Grillet calls for a reformulation of the aims and form of the novel: "the novel's forms must evolve in order to remain alive" (Robbe-Grillet 8). He explains how, all the features of the traditional realistic novel such as the "systematic use of the past tense and the third person, unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, regular trajectory of the passions, impulse of each episode toward a conclusion, etc." were meant to express "the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe" (Robbe-Grillet 32). Nowadays, the intelligibility of the world has been utterly questioned and as a consequence the realistic system "is no more than a memory", a "dead system" (Robbe-Grillet 33). In accordance with the new reality, man should be seen "as a being in the world, as radically situated as any other object" (Waugh 1992 4). He consequently advocates a form of literature in which the *surface reality* would be described as subjectively perceived by the consciousness which looks at it: "we must try, then, to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references" (Robbe-Grillet 21).

Already in *La Jalousie* (1957), Robbe-Grillet had identified the past tense as the distinctive trait of traditional narrative, and had begun adopting the present tense in his works. However, it needs be pointed out that it was not the tense in itself which marked the originality of the text, but rather the *way* it was employed. He had replaced the traditional past with a completely objective "speakerless" present: in the novel there is a total objectivization of what its consciousness perceives, without any

reference to the latter as the central subject who experiences those perceptions. As a result, no consciousness seems to speak; the accent is put on “the very movement of the description” (Robbe-Grillet 148). Brooke-Rose defines Robbe-Grillet’s use of the present tense “scientific” since “as in a scientific law, or indeed as in our critical language [...] there is no seer, only the seen” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 138).

Apart from being driven by the wish to develop a form of literature which embodies the new reality as discovered by science, Robbe-Grillet is evidently influenced by Sartre’s philosophy, as are Nathalie Sarraute and Michel Butor. The *nouveau roman* description of the outer world of objects seems to be linked to the idea of self-determination which the existentialism envisaged as the basic characteristic of the individual. The objects described in the new novels exist as utterly separate from the human eye which observes them, they are inanimate but independent from the human perception, “autonomous” we could say. The human being is seen as no longer endowing things with meaning.

Together with the past tense, Robbe-Grillet rejects the linear order of events of realist fiction: “in the modern narrative, time seems to be cut off from its temporality. It no longer passes. It no longer completes anything” (Robbe-Grillet 155). *Les Gommages* (1953) presents no linear chronology and offers different versions of the same event. In *La Jalousie*, it becomes impossible to distinguish moments that are “really” observed from those that are merely projections of the jealous narrator’s mind. In *Dans le Labyrinthe* (1959), an erratic chronology deconstructs conventional concepts of time and space. What these narratives present is a mental perception of time, a time where it is impossible to distinguish what is “real” from what is a projection of the mind.

Together with Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute is among the leading theorists of the *nouveau roman*. Her famous *Tropismes* (1939) was republished in 1957 and received much more attention than when it first appeared. The work is made up of a series of brief passages where unnamed characters are presented as interrelated to, and interdependent on, each other. In Sarraute’s words, tropisms are “mouvements intérieurs [...] actions invisibles, très rapides et précises qui s’accomplissent en nous, que nous sentons confusément avant qu’elles ne parviennent à notre conscience” (Sarraute 1996 1651). Tropisms are the instinctive movements that cross our

consciousness very rapidly; they subtend our life and determine, albeit unconsciously, our relationships with others. They are the imperceptible sensations which link us to other people and make us interact with them in one way or another. Tropisms – which become the unifying thread among the various sketches of Sarraute's novel – are therefore our mind's inner movements which, albeit involuntary, influence our behaviour. Sarraute particularly developed the ideas of the *nouveau roman* in such works as *Portrait d'un Inconnu* (1948). In it, the flux of narrative which is constantly interrupted and the reliability of the narrator's observations are undermined, emphasising the author's rejection of any kind of objective representation of reality. Instead of objectivity, the reader only finds incertitude and contradiction. *L'Ère du Soupçon* (1956) – Sarraute's most famous collection of essays – analyses the new literary forms of the *nouveau roman*. Here Sarraute totally dismisses the need for a cohesive narrative, and welcomes the death of the "character" in fiction: "le personnage n'est plus aujourd'hui que l'ombre de lui-même" (Sarraute 1956 72). The realist character is replaced by "une matière anonyme comme le sang, [...] un magma sans nom, sans contours" (Sarraute 1956 74).

The experimental solutions of the *nouveau romanciers* certainly represented new forms in relation to a new "reality", and surely Brooke-Rose considered the solutions of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute as a "successful attempt to redefine the discursive status of the novel in terms of a modern scientific conception of the relation of language to reality" (Birch 190). Already in her essay "The Baroque Imagination of Robbe-Grillet" (1965), Brooke-Rose exhaustively expounds on the *nouveau roman* practices. In the revised version of the article, included in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, she explains how Robbe-Grillet's "obsessive dwelling" on objects and external reality has the purpose of recreating "a psychological reality which is far more convincing, for our time, than that re-created by description of psychology or other means in the realistic novel" (Brooke-Rose 1981 297). The original example of the *nouveau roman* as related to the new scientific theories functioned as a primary stimulus for Brooke-Rose to approach her new literary perspective. However, it needs to be pointed out that the new scientific theories delineated above contributed to the development of Brooke-Rose's experimentalism

for another, crucial reason. At the beginning of the sixties, when Brooke-Rose became more and more involved with such theories, she also realised that scientific language “bred” its own poetry, i.e. that technical jargons possessed highly metaphorical value and could be therefore employed at the service of literature. In other words, she realised how the scientific terminology could be employed in literature to express metaphorical meaning. As she explains in an interview, the jargon used in science “bred [its] own curious poetry”. The terminology and specific sentences used in scientific books, “fired [her] imagination as poetic metaphors for what happens between people, and people are and always will be the stuff of the novel” (Wakeman 224). This intuition that a peculiar kind of poetry could be derived from technical idiom, together with the need to evolve new literary forms to suit newly discovered reality, and with example of the *nouveau roman*, lead to the new solutions evident in her first experimental novel.

In *Out* in fact, she discards the past tense – which had always been used in order to reassure the readers on the reliability of events – and adopts what she defines as “SPT”, i.e. a “simultaneous” or “scientific present tense” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 2, 140) where the figure of the narrator vanishes and the author – who does not furnish authorial guidance – puts herself into the consciousness of the characters, to see with their eyes and represent what they see or hear around themselves, to represent their very capacity to look around but in an *unreflective* way. The result is a “detached” narrative which aims at expressing the new reality of the scientific theories and our changed relation to the world.

The narrative is speakerless in the sense that the reader can only identify the consciousnesses of the moment by the context: it is impossible to identify a narrator in the conventional sense of “paper-character”, as if the text itself was speaking. The “invisible” author limits herself to represent perceptions impersonally and avoids the conventional and familiar use of the past tense in order to express objectively “the constant impact of outside phenomena on an active but not always reflective consciousness” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 153-4).

Out also utterly discards traditional ideas of characters and plot and presents the peculiar use of specialized jargon as metaphor which was to become one of Brooke-Rose’s distinctive traits, thus marking the turning point in her mode of

writing, setting out the experimental direction she had come to take, both in relation to the new scientific theories, to the example of the *nouveau romanciers* and to her own original intuitions about the metaphorical use of jargons.

The novel is set in a future dystopian world where an unexplained catastrophic event known as “the displacement” has led to a geographical, political and social readjustment. In geographical terms, there is a new division of continents: Afro-Eurasia, Sino-America and Chinese Europe. In political and social terms, the colour bar has been turned upside down: the white race is subordinated to the coloured ones. Black people are the richest and most powerful, but even pink and yellow races are wealthier than white people. Indeed it is stated that if “Pink is a colour. Yellow is a colour. Beige is a colour [...] White is the colour of the mal-[ady]” (O 48), a peculiar disease, a sort of radiation poisoning which causes chemical mutation and which has spread on the earth after the displacement. The “melasian races” are totally immune to this “malady” and have therefore become powerful, while the white race, suffering from this sickness, has lost its former supremacy and its members live ghettoized in settlements of shacks, working as servants. They are considered as irresponsible and inattentive workers. Quite revealingly, white people are defined “Colourless”. This term is used by Brooke-Rose not by chance: it alludes in fact to the lack of colour rather than being the “wrong” colour. Lack of colour is viewed as symptomatic of lack of character and strength. In contrast to black people who are defined “warm-hearted” (O 161), colourless people are indeed considered “cold fish, cold-blooded, cold-hearted” (O 149): “the cold-hearted kind, they call us, you know” (O 158), says a white man to the central character of the novel.

The displacement is said to have been “the displacement from cause to effect” (O 119, 120, 174). I read this last statement as implying that it could be the white race that has undergone a shift from cause to effect. Whereas, before the displacement, the white race was the cause of the world social order, holding the economic and political power, exploiting the black race’s resources and exhibiting/perpetuating racism against coloured people, now all the mistakes and wrongs the colourless have done revolt against themselves, the white race being therefore no longer the cause, but the effect of its very previous actions. Throughout the novel we find peculiar images that strike us as subversive of our ‘traditional’ representation of the “world

order”, such as black mannequins in the shop windows (O 82), or a black woman who sits “at her dressing table, brushing her thick black hair” or “having her thick long black hair brushed” (O 25). These images, which reverse habitual paradigms and dismantle conventional socio-historical representations, had obviously a much stronger impact in 1964 than they could have today.

The central consciousness of the novel is a white old man, unnamed and with no specific pronoun referring to him. He is sick and spends most of his time between the shack where he lives with his wife, Lilly, and the Labour Exchange, where he goes in search of an occupation. He first finds a job as a gardener, working for the rich Mrs. Mgulu. Yet, unable to carry on his task properly because of his illness, he loses his job. Willing to help him, Mrs. Mgulu eventually employs him again as a construction worker in her house, but his sickness gets worse and worse and he is finally confined to his shack where his wife looks after him. Apart from his bodily weakness, the central character of *Out* is considered psychologically sick by the other members of society. He is thought to suffer from a psychological disease, in that he searches for his origins, trying to find out what he was before the displacement and consequently to understand what he *is* now. He continuously reinvents his past identity: he claims to have been an electrician (O 24), a welder (O 62), a fortune-teller (O 62), a psychopath (O 127), or else – demonstrating a peculiar subversive humour – he says that he was a builder and “built the tower of Pisa and it leant” (O 19-20). However, the notion of diachronic identity is shown to be old-fashioned in the new society, and the concept of memory is considered obsolete too: “there is no such thing as the past [...] that’s an article of faith” (O 118). In order to be cured from his peculiar disease, the old man is submitted to “psychoscopy” (O 135-141), a psychoanalytic treatment performed with a newly invented machine which shows a person’s “biogram”, “the extracted absolute of your unconscious pattern throughout your life [...] your harmonious rhythm, your up and down tendencies” (O 149). In other words, psychoscopy is a sort of re-building of the self, a brain-restructuring process. The treatment supplies the patient with a new notion of present identity and cures his willingness to look for origins and causes. By means of psychoscopy people are given precise thoughts and ideas, aims, ambitions and even working attitudes. Such an aggressive psychoanalytic method is however presented as a sort

of “luxury” (O 148), since “very few Colourless get it” (O 148). In fact, the old man undergoes psychoscopy only thanks to Mrs. Mgulu, who writes a letter to Dr. Fu Teng in order to recommend her employee for the treatment (O 132). We even apprehend from Mrs. Joan Dkimba, a rich friend of Lilly’s, that

All politicians are psychoscoped regularly. And their wives. Well, they have to be. I mean the situation would be too dangerous otherwise [...] it’s thanks to psychoscopy that everything is running as smoothly as it has, quite under control in fact. (O 150)

This newly-generated civilization is therefore presented as a really coercive one, a society where everything is planned and controlled and which eventually moulds the minds of its members. As if to confirm the control society exercises on people, eventually by re-organizing their way of thinking to suit its aims and procedures, the doctor tells the protagonist of the novel during the treatment: “I am your doctor, father, God. I build you up. I know everything about you” (O 138). The sentence “I build you up” could be read in an ironical literal sense, implying the notion of fictional “character building” instead of that of curing a person.

Mrs. Mgulu is said to “take an interest” in the white man’s health because of her relationship to the man’s wife, but in reality she does not make him any better by recommending him for psychoscopy. The protagonist does not want to be “psychoscoped”, as he tells, or probably imagines telling Mrs. Mgulu after the treatment,

I don’t want it. I never wanted it, I was happy watching flies and eating gruel and talking to myself and making mental love to my wife. Why did you have to take an interest? I didn’t ask to be confronted with your accomplishments and your possessions. Why did you have to flaunt your privileges at me? All privilege brings its dissatisfactions and the privilege of health is no exception. I didn’t ask to be psychoscoped. It’s made me ill. I wasn’t ill before. Why did you have to enter and occupy me in this way? I don’t even like you. (O 161-2)

As narration progresses, the central consciousness of *Out* gradually gets more and more alienated from society and the institutions which try to maintain him under control. His perceptive stimuli undergo a process of distortion and deconstruction. Unable to find his own identity and deprived of his memory, the old man has to surrender to the sheer impossibility of finding ontological and epistemological certainties and has to admit that “Knowledge certain or indubitable is unobtainable” (O 60). The deconstructed and deconstructing consciousness of *Out* is incapable (and the reader along with him) to determine the ontological status of the “reality” he

perceives, to distinguish between “real” objects around him and imagination, experiencing a “breakdown of reality-testing” (Birch 60).

As already pointed out, a major aspect of Brooke-Rose’s experimentalism in *Out* centres around the “objectification of the point of view”. The reader apprehends just what moves by chance into the field of perception of a centre of consciousness which has got no “sense of himself as a narrator, as a functioning self” (Little 1995 68). In this, *Out* appears to have been greatly influenced by Robbe-Grillet’s fictional practice, in which there exists no narrator directing the information provided and the reader is offered only what “invades” the consciousness of the speaking or thinking subject. In *Out*, there are in fact no characters in the traditional sense. The reader feels like being inside the consciousness of the old man and directly or indirectly hearing voices which are not mediated by a narrator. Everything the character’s consciousness perceives is objectively presented. Moreover, since this consciousness is damaged, the reader is unable to distinguish whether the audio-visual perceptions presented are “objective” representations or misperceived/misrepresented ones, only mere products of his imagination. The text itself suggests several times the potential unreliability of some events, warning for instance,

This dialogue will not necessarily occur (O 12); it is difficult to tell who’s talking in this kind of dialogue (O 63); Either the conversation has partially occurred, the beginning for instance, the remainder being suppressed [...] Or the conversation has wholly occurred, and been wholly manipulated, transformed, schematised, because inunderstood. (O 108-9)

Within this particular kind of “self-reflexivity”, the text also states inversely the objectivity and reliability of its circumstances, “The sequence has occurred” (O 48), “The conversation is real, repeat real” (O 101).

Along with his consciousness, the central character’s language is likewise deteriorating. We could indeed trace a parallel between Lacan’s theory on the acquisition of language (Cf. Lacan 1989) and the peculiar backward process which the old man is subject+ to. If for Lacan the acquisition of language inaugurates the entrance of the subject into the Symbolic order of society and law, the character in *Out* is evidently going through a disacquisition of language and an exit from the social order. As the novel progresses, the protagonist’s use of language becomes in fact more and more transgressive. In this connection, I would not interpret this just as a deterioration of language, but I would rather read the transgression of the character’s language as subversive of the establishment he lives in. The protagonist

of *Out* goes through an identity crisis and along with his identity his language gets disrupted. Unable to have a precise identity within the new society and therefore unable to speak the same language as its members, he willingly alienates himself from the social order and decides to regain a sense of identity by manipulating the conventional language spoken by the others. In fact, he seems to be reconstructing a consciousness of his own through the pieces of discourses wrenched from other people's languages, restructuring these discourses in his own way. Linguistic transgression is crucially performed in the novel through the use of metaphor. It is important to specify the peculiar way in which Brooke-Rose employs this device: her conception of the term "metaphor" is in fact an extended one; it means not only, as traditionally conceived, the displacement of meaning from one word to another, but also the displacement of significance at the much larger level of *entire discourses*. Meaning is thus dislocated from one discourse to another. Disparate fields of knowledge or action come together giving birth to highly metaphorical passages where a specific concept or situation is totally re-contextualized.

In *Out*, the central character's linguistic transgression consists in that different perceptive stimuli are over and again associated with each other by him, leading to the fusion of different semantic fields. For instance, observing the bark of a fig-tree, he compares it with a thigh of creased denim: "the rough grey bark is wrinkled in the bend of the trunk like a thigh of creased denim shot with darker thread" (O 28), or else a double row of fig trees looks to his perception like "a network of bare branches [...] a corridor of cobwebs full of traps for flies, woven by a giant spider behind huge prison bars" (O 23). In this last image, the spider could also be a metaphor of the narrative practice as a texture woven by the writer.

The character's perceptive stimuli are described mostly by means of biochemical imagery, as for example when he observes the kitchen table in the moonlight and the wrinkles of the wood are associated with the veins in his wrist; soon after, a picture of "protozoan" life under the microscope is connected to an image of road traffic,

The pool of light engulfs the entire table and part of the red stone floor. The wrinkled wood is quite static in the light, as static, at any rate, as the network of minute lines on the back of the wrist. A microscope might perhaps reveal which is the more static of the two. The protozoan scene under the microscope is one of continual traffic jams and innumerable collisions. (O 58)

When the old man is visited by a doctor, he is advised: “You have a heart condition. Symptoms? Verbal diarrhoea, sanguine complexion [...] blood, belonging like words to the element of fire” (O 40). In fact, we could say that the fragments of discourses re-handled through his own vision of the world are like sparks, which threaten to disrupt the society he lives in. In a coercive society that wants to silence him, he finds his own space, between the interstices of conventional language, setting fire to conservative discourses. He acquires a sense of identity through his subversive manipulation of language.

The subtending trait of all of Brooke-Rose’s experimental works, i.e. the peculiar use and re-manipulation of language as a creative tool to express one’s own identity, is evident in *Out*. Yet, in the novel, as the author herself admits, she was very much under the sway of Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*. She would succeed in developing her experimentalism away from their direct influence only in her next novel, *Such*,

Robbe-Grillet did have a direct influence, at least on *Out*. [...] but then with *Such* I really took off on my own. I don’t think there’s any more influence of Robbe-Grillet on *Such*. I would say that *Such* is my first really “Me” novel, where I don’t owe anything to anyone else. (Friedman and Fuchs 82-3)

Owing to the points of contact between Brooke-Rose’s work and the solutions of the *nouveau roman*, the author has often been identified *tout court* with it. However, although she admired the exponents of the new movement and shared most of their theoretical postulates, she found, from *Such* onwards, her personal and original solutions.

The central consciousness of *Such* is Larry. Married with two children, he works as a psychiatrist at a research centre together with a group of astrophysicists. While Larry is being submitted to a surgical operation, his heart stops and he is believed to be dead. After a short while, Larry incredibly comes back to life, having experienced a different kind of existence during the few minutes, hours or even days of his apparent death.

The realistic mode of writing is here again broken down. What happens to Larry is presented objectively without any elucidation intervening to make clear who speaks. The voices and perceptions of the characters merge with one another, devoid of any narratorial explanation. The novel directly opens with Larry waking up, after his death, to his afterlife in a new world. He climbs out of his coffin in a world

described in astrophysical terms, a world where people are represented as “planets” or “moons” which “move in their orbits” (S 203). Larry meets a girl who carries “On her left spiral arm [...] a row of quintuplets” (S 204). The girl claims to have no name, but since Larry insists on designating her in some way, she accepts being called “Something” and decides to call Larry “Someone” (S 205). Someone-Larry wants Something’s five children to be baptized and named, as they will soon be, each after the title of a famous Blues song. The act of naming and the concept of the proper name – here clearly ironised – call into question the linguistic, psychoanalytic and literary theories of the period, as we will better consider in the next chapters.

After the babies are named, they go away “into orbit” (S 206) to return one after another to experience with Someone and Something some adventures and have in turn their life saved by Someone. As already mentioned, everything in the novel is described in astrophysical terms: Someone, Something and the children have “meridians” instead of arms (S 302); they make a journey “above ultra violet” (S 210), they land “on the left focus of an ellipse” (S 218) and live peculiar experiences in a cosmic surrounding. When Larry comes back to life, he is unable to cope with his previous relationships and tasks. He cannot communicate with the people around him and cannot return to his work. His wife and the people who try to help him eventually abandon him. He confounds his two children with the intergalactic offspring and continues to reason in astrophysical terms, seeing people as cosmic bodies or just waves or particles and even acquiring the peculiar faculty of “reading” people’s positive or negative waves and radiations. For instance, while conversing with a friend, he sees that “She [...] bombards our conversation with those particles of anxiety that spiral at high velocity around the lightning zig-zag of magnetic field” (S 355). Throughout the novel, either during Larry’s death-experience or after he “resuscitates”, the author makes use of the specific language of astrophysics as a metaphor for everyday life. We have already noticed how Brooke-Rose’s notion of metaphor is an extensive one which acts at the level of entire sentences and discourses.

As for *Out*, metaphor becomes here a structural principle of narration. However, there is a difference between the two texts. Brooke-Rose’s metaphoric use of language implies either the fusion of different discourses, or the metaphorical use

of *one* specialized jargon. In *Out* the use of biochemical jargon is applied as a metaphor to everyday circumstances, yet the novel's most recurrent type of metaphor is at the level of different intertwining discourses, i.e. the different perceptions of the old man are all fused together and explained mostly (but not always) through biochemical imagery. On the contrary, the employment of *one* specialized terminology is in *Such* much more extended than the amalgamation of different discourses. In other words, *all* the events are "filtered" through the jargon of astrophysics. For instance a problem of identity and relation to other people is discussed by Larry and Elizabeth, a friend of his, through the metaphor of the scientific principle of uncertainty:

- [...] In psychic terms [...] some of us preferring to pretend causality exists, and others, others preferring to prefer its absence. But you can never know with absolute certainty that what looks like the same particle, with the same identity –
- Yes but for practical purposes you have to, Larry, in the chemistry of people. Otherwise how can you live?
- You can't. Not really. You pretend you do. To save the appearances.
- Larry, you can't honestly believe that.
- I don't know. I think I believe that every particle of ourselves, whether combined with those of others in normal electrovalence to make up this or that slice of us, or whether bombarded by those of others until this or that human element mutates into some other, every particle of ourselves returns. So that it has, in that sense, identity. But you can never quite identify it at any given moment. (S 387-8)

The relations between people are seen in terms of particles that combine with each other and consequently influence one another. Each person has an "identity" which is not "fixed" and "identifiable", but rather in a constant process of change.

The metaphorical use of astrophysical idiom turns out to be a specifically poetical device. Astrophysical jargon becomes a very dynamic metaphor for the relationships among people in regard to both reciprocity and to distance, to communication and its difficulty. Metaphor structures the whole text, which thus aspires to the condition of poetry. In *Such*, more than in *Out*, the beauty and poetical power of specialized language in context are fully appreciable.

The experiences Someone-Larry goes through with Something and the five offspring could be viewed as "a hallucination experienced by Larry while his body is at a low level of psychic energy" (Birch 64). If one wishes to give a psychological interpretation to the incidents and characters described, Something could represent Larry's unconscious and the five children could stand for various aspects of his life that he has tried, as a psychiatrist, to set aside by "cataloguing" them, giving names to them. As a matter of fact, the babies blame Someone for having named them and

tried to send them away, “We all remain. You can’t get rid of us merely by giving us names and sending us into oblivion. Oblivion has its orbits, like everything, you know that” (S 329). Similarly, Something warns Larry, “I told you, Lazarus, you can’t get rid of origin by giving it names, except for a time. Origin comes back” (S 322). I would maintain that Larry’s death experience could be viewed as a sort of trial of his own self, a journey into his own unconscious which he embarks on in order to bring the problems of his subjectivity to the surface. To reinforce this interpretation is there the fact that Larry has “many names to answer to” (S 310). He is many times called “Lazarus” (S 223, 227, 309, 310, 322, 323, 324, 325, 331), the reborn man *par excellence*, and throughout the novel we encounter the image of Jonah (S 205, 227, 271, 290, 313, 344, 371), who acquired new life from his journey inside the whale.

However, if we see it in the light of conventional social paradigms, Larry’s rebirth turns out to be a failure: he does not reintegrate into society and his use of language, which has been permanently altered, alienates him from society. He lives within a language that other people do not share. He remains entangled within the bounds of his own language, unable to return to his previous language use and consequently to reintegrate into society.

To convey better the idea of Larry’s alienation by means of and within language, I would like to quote a section from the text which is particularly suggestive of this issue. This paragraph, which seems particularly poetical to me, will help demonstrating how technical jargon can be submitted to narrative poetic aims. Larry is alone and stares at his own image reflected in the mirror. In recalling his death experience, he feels neither anger, nor love, but rather a “thin yet sharp” pain. When he closes his eyes, he continues to see his own image, as if he was looking inside himself at the man he was before his death:

Inside the mirror on the landing of my consulting-room the shape stares back, spinning meridians, latitudes and spirals that grow and fill the entire glass but silently, emanating no messages, no nervous handwriting, no atoms of any anger, love or wonder. Something however creates the undulations and if not anger or love then some nebulous memory, surely, behind the eyes. But the eyes close to avoid the issue of their death and amazing recovery. The pain behind them resolves the optical image in the dark, as with a change of lenses, so that inside the mirror the tall thin man stares back, as before death, before recovery, as when life took its normal course through blood-vessels, nerve-fibres, muscle-spindles, tendons, flesh and such. (S 302)

It should by now be clear how in Brooke-Rose's first two fully experimental novels, *Out* and *Such*, the author's main focus is put on the issue of language as related to one's own consciousness. The identities of the central characters are closely, or rather inextricably linked to the acquisition/disacquisition of language. Language is viewed as the constitutive element of identity. If this latter is destroyed (as is the case in *Out*), language is disrupted along with it. Conversely, if the use of language is disturbed (as in *Such*), identity remains inevitably damaged. The central character of *Out* finds his own language and consequently gains a sense of identity by re-handling other people's language *out* of a coercive society, into a creation of his own, which is a subversive language. Differently, in *Such*, Larry loses his identity and seems to feel uneasy in his newly-acquired linguistic universe: his loss of identity is the consequence of his loss of language. In my view, the reason for this distinction between the two characters lies in the fact that the "protagonist" of *Out* starts from a marginal position in the society he lives in and consequently tries to subvert the establishment through his new use of language, whereas Larry starts from an opposite standpoint: he is in fact a psychiatrist and therefore he is one of those who "control" society through language. Consequently, he cannot feel at ease when he loses his "master language" to acquire one which is subversive of the very establishment he was once part of.

In these two novels, we also appreciate the use of some of the most outstanding features of Brooke-Rose's experimentalism, which will distinguish her writing through most of her subsequent works: namely, the application of a specific jargon as a metaphor for everyday life and her peculiar employment of metaphor at the level of discourses. The novels also present other issues which will come back in Brooke-Rose's following works. As we have seen, the concepts of memory and origin are present in both *Out* and *Such*. In *Out*, the central character searches for his origins and tries to recuperate his memory along with his identity. In *Such*, Larry tries to cast into oblivion some aspects of his past experiences but does not succeed in doing so. The notions of memory and origin are of fundamental importance in Derrida's theory and we will consider them at greater length when analysing *Thru*, where they are treated much more extensively and to more illustrative ends. *Thru* will also bring into focus the concept of one's own identity as reflected by the mirror, an idea which is

already present in the above quotation from *Such*, where a doubly split subject is at the centre of a mirroring process reflecting its own idealized (unitary) image. This mirroring process will indeed be central to our analysis of *Thru*. Similarly, the idea of a split personality – present in both *Out* and *Such* – will come back much stronger in *Between*, with the aim of deconstructing the notion of fixed identity and the concept of fixed meaning.

The metaphorical employment of different jargons and the fusion of discourses which we already appreciate in *Out* and *Such*, and which will be present in many of Brooke-Rose's subsequent works, must be necessarily understood in the light of Ezra Pound's modernist aesthetics in poetry. Pound is in fact, together with Samuel Beckett, one of the major influences evident in Brooke-Rose's writing.

The literary movements Pound promulgated in the first half of the twentieth century, Imagism and Vorticism, stressed precision and economy of language in the style of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, with the aim of expressing ideas in a succinct and economical form. Pound also advocated free verse, which is not constrained by formal considerations. He privileged poetry as song, musical rhythm, and expressed his aspiration "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome" (Pound 1934 335).

Fenollosa's unpublished notes on Chinese poetry and Japanese drama, which Pound received after the former's death, contributed to the strengthening of the modernist interest in Chinese and Japanese literature. Pound re-elaborated the literal versions of classical Chinese poems by Fenollosa into free-verse lyrics in *Cathay* (1915). Fenollosa had explained the functioning of Chinese ideograms: each written character is a "condensed" visual metaphor. From this, Pound derived his idea of a new kind of poetry: one made up of signs as "physical" objects on the page, one which juxtaposed both images and different allusions, fragments and a complex use of quotations from different narratives and other languages. In particular, the mingling of languages is considered by Imagism and Vorticism as possessing a strong poetic power (Cf. Cianci 1991 112-124, 156-172).

In this way, poetry would be both economical and deeply charged with meaning. This is the style of his encyclopaedic epic poem, *The Cantos* (1917-1960). The work presents its reader with an immense frame of reference, each allusion and

quotation juxtaposed with others in order to let metaphorical meaning emerge. *The Cantos* is polyphonic in theme and presents a mosaic technique based on collage, one which passes from one quotation to another, fusing together or juxtaposing numerous evocative fragments. Pound rejected completeness and linearity, structuring his *Cantos* on recurrence, repetition and juxtaposition. Conventional syntax disappears, giving way to parataxis: short sentences without coordinating or subordinating conjunctions.

Brooke-Rose particularly appreciated *The Cantos*. In *A ZBC of Ezra Pound*, she analysed in particular the way the many references Pound inserts in his poems interact with each other, while in *A Structural Analysis of Pound's Usura Canto*, she used Roman Jakobson's method of analysis and showed the dynamism of Pound's work. Brooke-Rose analysed Pound's poetry in other critical essays, among which "Cheng Ming Chi' I'd" (Brooke-Rose 1991 123-142), which she wrote for Eva Hesse's German translation of *The Cantos* (Hesse 1964). Pound's legacy will be particularly evident in *Between's* use of different languages, as well as in *Thru's* collage of quotations, in its juxtapositions and repetitions which engender highly metaphorical meaning and bestow upon the novel a peculiar poetical charge. Already in *Out* and *Such* however, Pound's legacy is clear in the metaphorical use of specialized jargon and in the juxtaposition of different discourses to create different nuances of meaning, as seen above.

In the last chapter, I will further analyse Pound's legacy in Brooke-Rose's works and show, in light of *Between* and *Thru*, how Brooke-Rose succeeds in overcoming the linguistic scepticism inherent in Pound's poetics. For the time being, and before analysing *Between* and *Thru*, however, I will further define the context in which her experimental works appear and to which they are connected. In fact, Brooke-Rose's gradual dissatisfaction with conventional literary criteria and her approach to experimentation need to be understood not only in relation to the new scientific theories delineated above, to the development of the *nouveau roman*, and to Pound's influence. Her new narrative practice also needs to be analysed within the wider frame of the socio-cultural atmosphere of the sixties, both in Britain and in France, where she moved in 1968. We will therefore try to delineate this panorama, showing the parallelisms between Brooke-Rose's work and that of other writers. In

fact, although Brooke-Rose's experimentalism is in many characteristics distinctively her own, it is important to look at other contemporaries who share some basic features with her. It is also important to look at another main influence on Brooke-Rose, that of Samuel Beckett.

The social and literary environment of the sixties is obviously essential to "place" Brooke-Rose's writing in context. From the end of the fifties, in fact, society had been going through a process of renewal which generated a new outlook on life and the dismissal of conventions. Several factors concurred to generate this new liberal mood which eventually gave way to radical literary innovation.

By the end of the Second World War, the world had undergone geographical, political, social, and economical changes. The reality of the concentration camps came gradually to light, and was fully discovered with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. The failure of rationalism became apparent as the rational utopias had led only to a monstrous genocide, as well as to the dropping of the atomic bomb and to the beginning of the Cold War. Hannah Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, focusing on the Eichmann trial and presenting the dangers implicit in the human yearning for meaning. The sense of the *failure of reason* and the collapse of rationalism lay at the roots of a widespread rejection of the values, morals and norms of society. As claimed by George Steiner, "the house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated western society, have largely broken down [...] We come after" (Steiner 15). Concurrently, the war in Vietnam was strongly opposed in Britain, while the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was an evident proof of the loss of power which Britain had undergone during the century. In 1964, the election of the Labour Government in Britain clearly marked a change of direction in the social consciousness. The rejection of old values and morals inaugurated a decade of deep social and cultural changes. Censorship was drastically reduced: Penguin Books published D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960. In April 1966, the *Time* magazine officially announced the birth of the "swinging sixties": an era of sexual freedom, music, fashion and celebration of youth. The women's liberation movement with its widespread questioning of gender roles and conventions was gaining more and more strength. It was an evidently highly charged socio-cultural period which culminated in the '68 student revolution in France, echoes of which

were heard all across Europe. All this generated more liberal attitudes to sex and opened up a new range of opportunities for women, both in the educative and in the working spheres. Paralleling the women's liberation movement, the new social consciousness about the role and identity of women bred a huge development in women's writing. Many women writers started questioning the conventional role of women in society and opened up new possibilities for the novel to represent the female consciousness and identity. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, exposing the mechanism of the oppression of women which thrives on the myth of romantic love, so that what is generally seen as domestic bliss is in reality a comfortable concentration camp where women's "capacity for self-determination" is "systematically destroyed" (Friedan 265). If conventions were being questioned and rejected in the social sphere, so they were too in literature. Many novelists rebuffed the social realism and the conservatism of the fifties and embraced experimentation. A new strand of literature was indeed already developing by the time Brooke-Rose approached experimentalism, a strand which would later be called postmodernist.

The term postmodernism first appeared in the context of American literary criticism in the fifties, and it was used in Charles Olson's *Causal Mythology* (1969) and *The Special View Of History* (1970), where he elucidated his poetic engagements. At the same time, in France, the *nouveau roman* found its theorisation in the works of Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon. With a parallel move, Susan Sontag rejected, in "Against Interpretation" (1966), "the idea that a work of art is primarily its content" and called for an "erotics of art" (Sontag 5, 14) which would replace the actual hermeneutics and focus on the *form* of literature. For Sontag, interpretation, "based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use" (Sontag 10). If, in our culture, "To understand *is* to interpret" and thus amounts to discovering the "true meaning" of a work, for Sontag, to interpret is rather "to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'" (Sontag 7). Against this state of things, Sontag called for more attention to form in art and explained that "The most recent revolution in contemporary taste in poetry – the revolution that has deposed Eliot and elevated Pound – represents a turning away from content in poetry" (Sontag 10). At the same time, in his influential essay "The

Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), John Barth proposed to discard “the literature of exhausted possibility” (Barth 1967 29) in favour of the parodic mode of replenishment. The task facing the contemporary author, he explained, is that of making language live again. Barth’s essay, however, was largely “misread as one more Death of the Novel” (Barth 1984 64), and Barth published a second essay, “The Literature of Replenishment” (1980), clarifying that his intention was only to point to possible directions towards which novel writing might move. Barth envisaged the chief qualities of the literature of replenishment, one which “requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration” (Barth 1984 66). Among these qualities are the disruption of the linear narrative, the frustration of conventional expectation on the reader’s part, the use of ironical and paradoxical juxtapositions, a tone of epistemological mockery towards bourgeois rationality and the representation of distortions and subjective points of view, as opposed to the pretension of objective discourse of the bourgeoisie. He later published a third essay, “Postmodernism Revisited” (1988), to further clarify his claims.

In “Cross the Border – Close that Gap” (1969), Leslie Fiedler questioned the gap between “high” or “serious”, and “popular” or mass art, suggesting a new art to “close the gap” between the two cultures and addressing works by authors such as John Barth, Leonard Cohen, and Norman Mailer. In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971), Ihab Hassan traced the development of what he defined the “literature of silence” and drew the differences between modernist and postmodernist fiction, while suggesting that the second is in some respect an extension of the first and in others a reaction against it. He used the term postmodern and talked about “postmodern spirit”, a spirit which started developing when the “crisis of the Western mind enter[ed] a new phase” after the terror of the Second World War and after the “Six Million” genocide (Hassan 139). Against this background, “The mythical world of recurrence, the historical world of continuity, prove inadequate temporal models of the world we are creating” (Hassan 247). Hassan expounded extensively on various writers and pinpointed some of the basic characteristics of postmodernist literature in opposition to modernism, among which are highlighted play, irony, performance, deconstruction, absence, discontinuity, and indeterminacy.

Many of these features are shared by the figures who are commonly defined as postmodernists. In addition to the ongoing work of writers such as Beckett, Pynchon or Robbe-Grillet, which bridge the supposed move from modernism to postmodernism, there did emerge a diverse group of writers often gathered under the name of the postmodern by critics. Under this heading are grouped writers as diverse as Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, B. S. Johnson, John Barth, John Fowles, Donald Barthelme, Gabriel García-Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Doris Lessing, Malcolm Bradbury, A. S. Byatt, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Italo Calvino, and many, many others. Indeed, the term postmodernism and its definition has been the focus of a large and exhausting debate which has perpetrated itself up to the present day, and which has seen the initially aesthetic significance of the term shift to acquire a much wider socio-cultural valence. We will, however, come back to this wider debate and its implications in our last chapter, in order to show how Brooke-Rose's work acquires a distinctive countertendential charge in relation to postmodernism's main tenets. Far from furnishing an exhaustive overview of postmodernist literature, we will here consider the works of other writers who, between the sixties and the seventies, together with Brooke-Rose, contributed significantly to innovation within the novelistic genre.

The new experimentalism which started developing from the sixties onwards mostly implied a "return" to the examples of modernist writers: the main experimental features of modernism were retaken and reworked, often expanded. In particular, if we look at the main areas of experimentation which modernism had set off, we can see how postmodernism actually addresses the same areas and brings them forward. These are, in particular: (1) the tendency to describe the inner world of human beings rather than any external "reality"; (2) a constant self-awareness of art and a strong attention upon the artistic medium itself, namely language; (3) experimentation with the time-structure of the novel, in particular the rejection of a linearly developing plot and the chronological presentation of events.

The first of the characteristics delineated above is particularly exploited by women writers. As the feminist movement gained force, many women writers produced works which raised awareness of gender difference, analysing the causes of women's oppression and/or describing the situation of women in contemporary

society. In 1965, Jean Rhys reappeared on the scene with *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Her writing provoked new interest and her earlier works were reissued. Rhys' style and technique became an example of the way modernist techniques could serve the contemporary presentation of women's consciousness and perspective. For instance, Edna O'Brien breaks with social realism in her novel *Casualties of Peace* (1966), which recalls Joyce's style in the short and disconnected sentences of the protagonist's thought. In 1970, Eva Figes publishes *Patriarchal Attitudes*, which unpicks the causes of women's oppression. In the same year, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* appears. In 1971, Fay Weldon's *Down Among the Women* describes in crude terms women's condition. Weldon abandons the past tense of realist fiction in favour of the present tense and purposely breaks up the fictional illusion in order to direct her reader's attention towards the real, social concerns of her novel. Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969) also overtly addresses social issues and offers, like Weldon's *Down Among the Women*, a double perspective: a first and a third person narrative which aims at rendering both the subjective gaze of women upon themselves and the external gaze of society upon them. Anita Brookner does something similar in *Providence* (1982), where first and third person narratives alternate to render two different perspectives of the same character. These perspectives correspond to the heroine's split identity: half English and half French, she is in fact split between different ways of seeing and considering herself which in part derive from the conventional roles society thrusts upon women. In the same line, Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* (1978) scrutinises a divided female consciousness, also by means of her writing technique, which splits down into the sections apparently written by the editor and the heroine's journal.

This attention to the inner consciousness of women derives certainly from modernism, from Virginia Woolf as well as from Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair, from their attention to what Woolf called the "room of one's own" (Cf. Woolf 1929), the private space of consciousness which allows women to take an estranged view of reality and society. Among the most significant contemporary women writers is Doris Lessing. In 1962, Lessing published her most famous work, *The Golden Notebook*. Through Anna's struggle – derived from the difficulty she experiences in integrating her different selves – Lessing presents various concerns

related to women's identity and role as embedded in the social and political movements of her time. She expounds on culturally endorsed ideas about love, sex, family, and friendship. Lessing rejects conventional representation and significantly explores the inner and outer pressures which bear upon the protagonist.

All the above-named authors clearly show affinities with Brooke-Rose. In *Between*, Brooke-Rose sets out to describe the causes of women's oppression in contemporary society, in a language which aims at finding patterns capable of expressing the subjective feminine identity of the protagonist. The central character in *Between* is depicted as a split identity, thus positioning the text in line with such works as *Providence*, *The Bad Sister*, and *The Golden Notebook*. Like Anna in Lessing's work, the protagonist of *Between* makes evident how a variety of socio-cultural tenets such as love, sex, and religion, have their roots in a masculine-dominated society and bear upon the expression of feminine identity.

Another work which shows, perhaps more than any other, affinities to Brooke-Rose's *Between* is Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*. The novel appeared in 1969, only one year after *Between*, and closely resembles the latter in many of its characteristics. It is set in an airport, where the protagonist, rather than departing to go somewhere, has decided to remain "in transit", in a sort of comfortable limbo, conversing with her self, with the reader, and with other people at the airport. Like *Between*, *In Transit* presents different languages – those to be heard at the airport – as well as many kinds of linguistic puns. In particular, some of the double-reading puns are presented as reminiscences of the protagonist's childhood, a feature which makes Brophy's novel resemble *Between*. The theme of sexual identity, or better of sexual *indeterminacy*, is central in both novels. Brophy's protagonist puzzles the reader as she remarks, "It was during the scudding of the back of the spoon across the opaque liquid that I realized I could no longer remember which sex I was" (Brophy 71). There is no clear evidence of her gender and even her name – Evelyn Hilary, called Pat – is sexually ambiguous. We find the same sexual indeterminacy in *Between*, where the protagonist, as we will see, seems to be more androgynous than feminine, uniting in her self both opposite genders. As in *Between*, Brophy's protagonist has suffered a past which still and ineluctably affects her. Like *Between*, *In Transit* is enjoyable and very funny, and offers a clear image of a changing world, one where air travel can

connect different parts of the world in a short span of time, one in which globalization and multilingualism are encroaching. The narrator of Brophy's novel significantly reflects that "Perhaps our whole century is in transit" (Brophy 23). The narrative feature which distinguishes *In Transit* from *Between* is the former's use of a first person narrator who explicitly refers to herself with the subject pronoun *I*, a feature which *Between*, diversely, rejects. Another difference, in my view, is that in Brophy's novel we find more "completed actions" than in *Between*. The protagonist of *In Transit* is seen as directly conversing with other people, as well as witnessing various events which take place at the airport, whereas the protagonist of *Between* is never depicted as doing something specific or existing in a precise place and time; she is perennially seen as *in between* places and times. Another feature which apparently distinguishes *In Transit* from *Between* is the identification of Brophy's protagonist's with many different names. However, in my view, the presence of *too many* names prevents the heroine from fully identifying with any one of them, paradoxically functioning in the same way as the lack of name of Brooke-Rose's translator.

Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is also indicative of another basic development of postmodern fiction, namely the self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of art which is largely present in fiction from the sixties onwards. Anna is both a woman and an author, and the pressures which bear upon her relate to both these aspects of her personality. In this way, Lessing focuses on the problematic concept of authorship, in a specifically female context, and on the relationship between author and characters. Anna's anxieties extend into doubts about the very ability of language to represent reality and result in a critique of the act of writing: the protagonist admits that she is "incapable of writing [...] a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life" (Lessing 76). She realises that knowing is an "illumination", but "there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words" (Lessing 549).

These anxieties about writing and its techniques perfectly exemplify the tendency toward self-awareness within postmodernist fiction, another major area of experimentation where the legacy of modernism is evident. Far from trying to create realist illusion, postmodern fiction is nearly always self-conscious regarding its own

illusory status. Its attention is more and more directed towards the nature of language, its capacity to represent “reality” and the awareness of its limitations. Linguistic self-consciousness clearly derives from modernism, as it had increasingly been developed by Joyce. His work more and more focused on the primary medium of literature, language, from the reflections upon the connection of words to reality made by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), through the amazing linguistic creativity of *Ulysses* (1922), to the *Work in Progress* which would become *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and which would represent the “final stage” of Joyce’s parabola. In *Finnegans Wake*, in fact, language does not aim at representing the world any longer. Language takes over the content of the text, and all that seems to interest Joyce is the musicality, the sound-quality of the words: linguistic inventiveness and self-consciousness is celebrated as a means to itself. In *Finnegans Wake*, the reader’s attention is directed almost uniquely towards language, the relationships between words, their phonetic and/or etymological value. Joyce aims more at celebrating language than reflecting the world or telling a story, thus inaugurating what was described by Eugene Jolas as the “autonomy of language” (Jolas 79), and becoming the precursor to the self-referentiality and self-consciousness of postmodernist fiction. After Joyce, and in his wake, other authors concentrated on the nature and “representative possibilities” of the linguistic means. In particular, Samuel Beckett, Joyce’s friend and follower, extends the “autonomy of language” Joyce initiated and specifically explores language’s frailty in his trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt*, *L’Innommable* (1951-1953; English trans. 1955-59).

The work of Samuel Beckett is, together with Pound, another major literary influence on Brooke-Rose’s writing, one which cannot be abstracted from when considering her narrative. The three novels of the trilogy are written in the first person, in the form of monologues which further develop the fluidity of Joyce’s language: the *flood* of speech is presented to the reader in what sometimes seems to be “one endless breath”, mostly without formal breaks or pauses such as paragraphs. The monologues are however often discontinued by the narrators themselves, who stop and strive to find the right expression for what they “are trying to say”, or pause to consider problems of linguistic “inefficiency”. Beckett’s narrators are deeply concerned with words and with what words convey/do not convey. For example, in

Molloy, *Molloy* and *Moran* often break up the fluidity of speech with such remarks as “That last sentence is not clear, it does not say what I hoped it would” (Beckett 1979 152). These kind of remarks progressively increase in *Malone Dies* and in *The Unnamable*². Malone even describes the insurgence of practical problems which render difficult his writing, such as, for instance the disappearance of his exercise book and pencil. The narrators of the trilogy increasingly struggle to narrate, to articulate their words. The *Unnamable* will finally bring this self-consciousness about language to its limit, relentlessly pondering on the hopelessness of representation, on the inability of language to represent “reality”. The last novel of the trilogy is entirely focused on the linguistic means and the difficulties encountered in trying to convey something, anything. Its narrator will come to the ineluctable “conclusion” that “it all boils down to a question of words”, that there are only words, “all words, there’s nothing else” (Beckett 1979 308, 381).

Beckett’s narrators face the void of language, the “black void” where “all is silent”, and of which they “know nothing [...] except that it is black, and empty” (Beckett 1979 278). This void represents the loneliness of the modern man in a universe where no ultimate meaning can be found. Yet, even in the face of these difficulties and of language’s unreliability, even in the face of this void, and most probably because of this, Beckett’s narrators convey a strong sense of their *urge* to speak: in their solitude, they *need* to articulate. The impulse towards language can neither rest, nor fulfil itself, given the impossibility of the linguistic medium representing anything. They try to confront the void by means of stories: they tell story after story only in order to distract themselves from the void. Language and narrative imagination are inextricably related to one another, as well as to the ultimate question of existence. Beckett’s narrators thus express and embody the *inability* of language to represent reality. In the end, they are revealed to be only story-tellers, hollow figures created in order to tell stories. Each of them is an additional imaginative construct, created by the next one, in order to distract himself from the void. In this sort of fictional spiral, the last narrator, the *Unnamable*, seems to point up to its creator, the author himself. Beckett’s trilogy thus deeply scrutinises the issue of language, its inability to express or represent, and the imagination which

² The title of the work in the English translation appears both as *The Unnamable* and *The Unnameable*. I will here use the term “Unnamable”, in accordance with the edition used.

almost desperately needs to narrate in order to keep the void from advancing. The narrators of the trilogy convey a sense of emptiness, despair and seclusion, but they also present the reader with a fine dark humour and beautiful descriptions which seem to contradict the main assumption of language's incapacity to convey meaning.

Beckett's influence on Brooke-Rose is palpable in the flowing syntax of Brooke-Rose's novels. Although their technique of juxtaposition seems to derive mainly from Pound, the latter uses juxtaposition for his clear and economical style, i.e. in short, staccato sentences, whereas Brooke-Rose employs juxtaposition at the larger level of long sentences or entire paragraphs, thus adopting the *sheer flow* of Beckett's monologues. In Brooke-Rose, the mosaic style of Pound with its metaphorical charge, and the flowing syntax of Beckett, thus seem to converge. The narrators of *Thru*, like Beckett's narrators, will be only story-tellers, paper inventions created in order to keep on telling stories upon stories. They embody the same urge to narrate, the same need to keep on inventing stories we find in Beckett. They also continually discuss (though in different terms from Beckett) the issues of language and the void which linguistic structures presuppose or hide. In my view, however, Brooke-Rose's writing surpasses the linguistic scepticism posited in different ways by both Pound and Beckett. However, in order to discuss this issue, it is necessary to look first at *Between* and *Thru*. We therefore postpone further discussion of this until the final chapter. We will then see how Brooke-Rose, writing in the wake of Beckett, nevertheless brings forward the autonomy of language into a positive reaffirmation of its referential value.

Another to write in the wake of Joyce is Flann O'Brien. His novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, originally published in 1939, was reissued in 1960 and found a larger audience then. It is a humorous "story about stories", or better a "story about telling stories", where a publican locks his fictional characters in a hotel room in order to control them, but they eventually escape from his plot and take over the story. They all become story-tellers and compete against each other, finally telling a story about a man who writes a story about a man who writes a story about story-tellers. The novel becomes even more self-conscious as its "main" narrator presents other fragments of stories within the story and intrudes in the narration to discuss writing problems. The act of writing, or better the act of story-telling, thus becomes the central focus of *At*

Swim-Two-Birds. *Thru* will resemble Flann O'Brien's work in its presentation of a multitude of narrators who struggle to impose their own version of the stories. *Thru* will also develop the metadiegetic technique of stories within stories *ad infinitum* and, again like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, it will present the figure of the narrator who seems to intrude in the narrative, though in a much more subtle and covert way than in Flann O'Brien's novel.

From the sixties onwards, the artistic self-consciousness initiated by modernism is reworked, often to extremes, by many British authors. The most experimental of them is probably B. S. Johnson, whose writing shows the influence of Joyce, Beckett and O'Brien. His first novel, *Travelling People* (1963), presents different narrative techniques, such as letters, journals and monologues. It also presents many blacked-out pages and shows already a self-consciousness regarding literary means which was to be further developed in his subsequent novels. In *Albert Angelo* (1964), Johnson radically challenges the time-structure of the conventional novel: the pages have holes in order to let readers see into the future. Fictional self-awareness is brought to an extreme as the author intervenes personally to declare that he is telling only a heap of lies. *The Unfortunates* (1969) challenges the time-structure even further as the novel is presented in a box containing loose pages to be read and enjoyed at random. In this way, Johnson tries to overcome the constraint of the conventional novel: the book which forces the reader to read chronologically one page after the other in a serial order. In *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), the author converses with the protagonist circa the events of the story and their progression, pointing out the drawbacks of a narrative which presents an omniscient narrator.

Other writers in the sixties and seventies, such as John Fowles and John Berger, share a highly developed self-consciousness about fiction writing and its mechanisms. Brooke-Rose parallels the experimentalism of these novelists in many ways. The artistic self-consciousness of *Thru* and its typographical display share in the self-aware discussions of the relationship between fiction, language and reality which are widespread in postmodernist fiction. The interaction between the plane of the "real" and the fictional world, represented by the narrator's intrusion into the narrative, exemplifies the ontological instability endorsed by postmodernist theories.

This is clearly linked to the issue of linguistic expression: language is unable to “represent” reality, meaning slips away from the subject, who therefore is no longer able to know “reality”. Many fictional works portray the instability, or better the fictionality, of the world we live in and the impossibility of knowing “reality”. They do so, for example, by giving the reader different versions of the same story. Since “reality” is unknowable and meaning depends only on interpretation and point of view, the presentation of different possible descriptions of the same event undermines the realistic monolithic approach to meaning. Lawrence Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957-60) offers the reader three points of view, and therefore three different versions of the same story. The quartet also inscribes itself into postmodernism for its self-reflexivity, its self-conscious discussion of literary issues, and for the different forms of writing it presents. In the same way, Brooke-Rose’s *Thru* will offer different possible interpretations of the stories narrated, and a range of different forms of writing which challenge the status of the novel as a genre.

The same postmodernist ontological uncertainty is expressed by characters who can exist on different planes at once. They are indeed able to wander from other texts or from “reality” into the text, as for instance in Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), where Freud and Jung are happily together, or in Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), where Richard Nixon tries to seduce Ethel Rosenberg. Given the ontological instability of “reality”, writers play on our sense of the real, making possible worlds and planes of existence interact. Brooke-Rose will bring this unstable ontology to extreme consequences in *Thru*, which presents an immense intertextual network of *dramatis personae* coming from both fictional texts and the “real” world. The same will happen in *Textermination*, where a conference held at the Hilton hotel in San Francisco reunites fictional characters from disparate literary periods and present time TV characters, with the communal aim of praying for their survival in readers’ minds.

Parody becomes one of the central aesthetic practices of postmodernist writers, a practice which is envisaged by Sontag as a strategic way of avoiding interpretation; a practice which is also recognised by Barth as an essential characteristic of the literature of replenishment. Parody becomes a strategy to focus on the fictionality of “reality”. In America, John Barth rejects realistic representation and moves towards

parody and artistic self-consciousness already in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966). Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) parodies the rationalism of the American military force by means of a mocking, almost fantastical exaggeration which is paralleled by the real human pain and death of the Second World War. This technique makes visible, by contrast, the effects of power. In *Cat's Cradle* (1963), Kurt Vonnegut humorously criticises the liberal ideological consensus of the Cold War. Brooke-Rose's *Thru* will employ parody in order to deconstruct the notion of fixed and stable meaning, and therefore the idea of a reality which is given and knowable once and for all. Concurrently, the irony of *Thru* will aim at *teasing* the confusion of theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction.

Another area of literary innovation which develops from the sixties onwards is concerned with the rejection of linearly-developing narratives. In the time-structure experimentalism of postmodernist fiction, the modernist legacy is, once again, evident. The "extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind" (Woolf 1928 91) is already addressed by modernists, who advocate internal human time as opposed to the external time of the clock of realist fiction. The reliance on memory tends now to give life to non-linear narratives which had their most influential modernist examples in Joyce and Woolf, as well as in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27). Time-structure innovation is evident for instance in William Golding's *Pincher Martin* (1956), which represents a step forward in the line of the modernist "abbreviation" of time. The whole novel is in fact built upon a single instant in the mind of its protagonist. Brooke-Rose also discards the linear developments of events. Already *Out* and *Such* follow more the "wanderings" of the protagonists' minds than the objective presentation of events in a causal order. *Between* will be constructed entirely on the "time of the mind", on the associative reminiscences of its central character, while in *Thru* the temporal plane curiously seems not to exist, as everything is reduced to the same time-plateau.

From what we have said, it is clear that Brooke-Rose's innovative approach to fiction shares in the wide context of the English (and American) experimentalism which developed from the sixties onwards. However, the author's experimental solutions must be understood also in light of the French cultural panorama of this period. In 1968, Brooke-Rose moved to France, where she started working and

where she was to remain up to the present time. In Paris, she found herself in direct contact with a highly charged cultural atmosphere. She encountered the most luminary members of the various newly-created literary circles, with the *Tel Quel* group, with the OuLiPo group, with the most prominent feminist writers, as well as with the literary theorists of poststructuralism and deconstructionism. It is easy to imagine how strong the impact of the French speculative debate was to be on her literary practice.

The *Tel Quel* group included among its members Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gérard Genette, Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, and Tzvetan Todorov. The group was founded in 1960 and grew up in opposition to the established socio-cultural institutions. Its participants advocated a revolution in literary practice. *Tel Quel* posited itself as an instrument of cultural renewal and its review became one of the most influential literary journals in France. One of the imperative claims of the group was the absolute need to free language from the linguistic clichés of bourgeois society. The members of *Tel Quel* shared with Brooke-Rose the view that reality is a construct of language and attacked the realistic mode of representation as representative of the bourgeois ideological constructs. In particular Sollers shares with Brooke-Rose the extensive use of quotations and echoes from other texts.

The OuLiPo – Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle – group was founded in 1960 by the mathematician François le Lionnais and the writer Raymond Queneau. Among its members were Georges Perec and Italo Calvino. The group's declared aim was that of bringing together the distinct domains of literature and mathematics in order to produce experimental literature. With Calvino, Brooke-Rose shares an interest in linguistic play, while Perec parallels Brooke-Rose's writing in his use of peculiar linguistic constraints or lipograms: his novel *La Disparition* (1969), in fact, is written entirely without the letter "e".

These innovative contemporary linguistic, psychological, and literary theories gave the intellectual scene a real twist: the debate was developing around language as linked to one's own identity, around the connection between language, reality and identity: Lacan's psychoanalytic theory saw the subject as structured by means of its entrance into the Symbolic Order of language and society. Barthes declared the

Death of the Author and theorised the Text of pleasure. Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions led to the exposure of the metaphysics of presence and to the idea of arche-writing and *différance*, which was followed by Kristeva's – in opposition to Lacan's masculine view – deconstruction of feminine identity and her conception of poetic language, where the Semiotic continually breaches the Symbolic and disturbs it. This extremely rich cultural *milieu* galvanised the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism. At the same time, theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Monique Wittig questioned the values and categories upon which traditional fiction relied from a theoretically militant feminist perspective. Irigaray, who taught at the University of Vincennes from 1970 to 1974, was at that moment a member of the EFP, "École Freudienne de Paris", a school directed by Jacques Lacan. Her work challenged the establishment and was to influence the feminist movement for several decades. On account of the basic contentions of her doctoral dissertation, later published as *Speculum: Of the Other Woman*, Irigaray was expelled from the EFP and the University of Vincennes.

The *nouveau romanciers* were producing highly unconventional fiction. If Brooke-Rose had already before 1968 looked at the new novel as a source of inspiration, and in 1967 had even translated Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le Labyrinthe* into English, now she enters into direct contact with the *nouveau romanciers*. Together with Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, whose work we have already analysed above, another major representative of the *nouveau roman* was Claude Simon. However, he detached himself from the movement through his use of metaphor and his employment of history. Most of his novels in fact describe with photographic objectivity his own family history. His texts present no beginning and no end, and are open to several interpretations. For instance, *Le Vent* (1957) presents the same event from different perspectives and thereby generates different interpretive possibilities. His novel *L'Herbe* (1958) – set in 1940, at the time of the German invasion in France – is an attack on the traditional writing of history: for the author, history is made up of everyday occurrences. Indeed, nothing really "happens" in the story, which is overflowing with descriptions of houses and gardens. In *La Route des Flandres* (1960), we find a double chronology, as scenes from the war are juxtaposed with scenes from after the war in the life of the protagonist. *Triptyque* (1973)

concurrently presents different narratives – a wedding party, the drowning of a boy and a scene in a hotel room – mixed together and without any formal break. Simon mixes objective description with the stream of consciousness of his characters. His narrative often lacks punctuation and becomes a single, long flow.

Also among the foremost French personalities of the period were Maurice Roche and Michel Butor. Although they did not take an active part in the *nouveau roman* movement, they are often assimilated with it in light of their highly unconventional fiction, which banished traditional narrative principles such as linear plot, causality and the realistic representation of characters, and focused on the subjective way of seeing reality. In Butor's *L'Emploi du Temps* (1957), the protagonist moves among the streets and buildings of an English town, Bleston, where he has come to work for a year, experiencing a strong sense of disorientation as well as the feeling of being imprisoned in the surrounding reality. The novel presents a double chronology in the life and diary of the protagonist, as well as the minute description of objects (streets, buildings) in the style of the *nouveau roman*. *La Modification* (1957), Butor's best-known novel, presents a story within a story and is told entirely in the second person plural. Indeed, the protagonist talks to himself during a train journey from Paris to Rome. During the voyage, he decides to modify his initial project – he will not leave his wife for his mistress – and to write a book which will eventually become *La Modification*. Other works by Butor include *Degrés* (1960), *Description de San Marco* (1963), and *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* (1967). In the style of the *nouveau roman*, Butor's novels offer a detailed description of everyday circumstances and objects, and discard traditional concepts of plot, and chronology. However, differently from the *nouveau romanciers*, Butor puts the accents more on the consciousness of his characters, on their inner reality, than on the obsessive description of objects and inanimate surfaces. Butor also published the journal *Illustrations* for 1964 onwards. He was an active literary critic and explored, in many of his essays, the intertextual relationship between other artistic systems – such as music and painting – and literary discourse.

Maurice Roche, perhaps more than anyone else, parallels Brooke-Rose's experimentalism. His fiction seems to be the nearest to Brooke-Rose's practice for its sense of humour and its typographical devices. Like Brooke-Rose, Roche is a

polyglot, and approaches language with a great sense of linguistic humour. In his novels, he makes wide use of typographical display and of many other narrative features which are similarly employed by Brooke-Rose. Roche's texts – *Compact* (1966), *Circus* (1972), *CodeX* (1974), *Opéra Bouffe* (1975), and *Mémoire* (1976) – radically discard conventional linearity and appear to all be linked to one another, to the point that it is almost impossible to determine precisely where one text ends and another begins. In his novels, Roche mixes together a multitude of signifying systems. The cabbala, the occult, alchemy, astrology, chiromancy, pictograms, ideograms, tattoos, cave paintings, hieroglyphs, runic characters, rebuses, symbols taken from the Michelin tourist guide, and street signs are all present, concurring to shape highly polysemic texts which challenge any attempt to endow them with fixed meaning. Roche's texts emphasise their own typographical aspect in a myriad of ways: mirror writing, writing which must be read from right to left, bold types to reveal hidden meaning, acrostics (both in horizontal and in vertical on the page), fragments which resemble crossword puzzles, musical notations, and many other typographical tricks. Some fragments, for instance, are printed horizontally, but in opposite vertical directions, so that the reader has to turn the book around and around in order to read. All these features strongly recall Brooke-Rose's *Thru*, as do many others, such as the proof corrections which appear in handwriting in Roche's texts and which we will find in *Thru*, in the handwritten corrections and marks to the students' homework. In Roche we also find the use of different languages, although not to the same extent with which Brooke-Rose employs them in *Between*. Like Brooke-Rose, Roche makes wide use of intertextual reminders. Roche's texts, like Brooke-Rose's, encourage the reader to participate actively in the making of the text, but also furnish the reader with precise advice on how to interpret and read them. In numerous self-referential passages, the texts clearly furnish the reader with the rules of their functioning and explain the way they should be read in order for their peculiar visual/sound/meaning effects to be appreciated. For instance, *CodeX* presents two chiasmic images (once again recalling Brooke-Rose's *Thru*) and explains that they can be read in two directions (Cf. Roche 1974 74). The functioning of Roche's novels is made evident, offering the reader the same dialectical movement between deceit and display which we will appreciate in *Thru*. The very suggestions

“No mystery, there’s the secret”, in *Circus* (Roche 1972 15), and “Do it yourself”, in *CodeX* (Roche 1974 62), strongly recall *Thru*’s “this is [...] no mystery” (T 584), and its suggestion to the reader: “work it out for yourself it’s not very deep” (T 595).

Roche’s texts play on the nature of fiction and stress the visual experience of reading, constantly emphasising the different ways images and words can be read/interpreted. Stressing the relativity of meaning, they put the accent on the reader’s capacity to interpret and look at things in multiple ways. In *Compact*, for example, a series of vertical lines are referred to as an “enseigne lumineuse”. Soon after, the text explains that this image should be read obliquely and almost parallel to the line of vision. If we do so, we amazingly read “EYES EXCHANGE BANK” (Roche 1966 122). The visual illusion here is generated by the superimposition of two axes of vision, which determines the optical phenomenon called anamorphosis. Another example of anamorphosis in Roche’s texts is the skull visible in Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*. The painting is directly presented in *Opéra Bouffe* (Roche 1975 32), and the skull is a recurring symbol in Roche’s novels, often created with the arrangements of words on the page. This sort of concrete prose once again recalls *Thru*. Moreover, the presence of the anamorphosis in Roche’s work seems to imply that the apparent meaning of the texts is generated by an illusion. The same optical illusion will be constantly emphasised in *Thru*, where the image of the mirror is clearly said to produce such an illusory effect. The reader of Roche’s texts, like the reader of Brooke-Rose’s, has to learn to read the strong dialectical movement between literal and figurative meaning. It is as if the reader exchanged their eyes at the “EYES EXCHANGE BANK” of Roche’s texts and began to see things differently, to interpret them, always aware that there can be many ways of interpreting the same thing. As a result, we begin to question the logic of the fixed meaning and enjoy the free play of the signifier.

From what has been said, it is easy to see how much Brooke-Rose shares with both the English experimental fiction and the French avant-garde writers of the period. Parody, linguistic self-consciousness, time-structure innovation, and the focus on the inner consciousness of the characters, are all features central the wide process of literary renewal which took place in the sixties in British fiction. At the same time, a parallel movement of innovation takes place in France, enhanced by

post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories, and by the strong tenets of the *nouveau roman*. The deconstruction of the concept of identity, the objectification of the external reality which exists in a realm separate from the human subject, and consequently the minute description of inanimate objects and the presentation of a subject which no longer endows things with meaning, are all features which position Brooke-Rose in relation to the French panorama.

In addition, Pound's influence is clear in the juxtaposition of disparate fields of knowledge for metaphorical purposes, as well as in the stress on the surface materiality of language, as will appear clearly in *Between* and *Thru*. Likewise, the flowing syntax of Brooke-Rose's novels derives from Beckett's strong influence, together with the accent on the ability of language to represent "reality". In this light, Brooke-Rose shares with postmodernist writers such as B. S. Johnson and others the legacy of Joyce, the "autonomy of language" which he inaugurated.

It is also important to note here that, although Beckett was Irish, he lived and worked in Paris, and from the early 40s he wrote mostly in French, later translating his works into English. He lived in France throughout the war and his fiction is contemporaneous with the existentialism of Sartre and Camus. The bleak, pessimistic vision of Beckett's narrators can be seen as connected to the French existentialist philosophy and to the experience of the War. The legacy of Beckett in Brooke-Rose, therefore, could be seen as being as much a part of her participation in French culture, as in its British counterpart. Indeed, as we will better see below, Brooke-Rose stands at the *border* between the two cultures, and cannot be assimilated entirely with one or the other. Her experimentalism cannot, by any means, be reduced *solely* to the *nouveau roman*. She partakes both of the British and of the French cultures, showing in her work a deep understanding of both. However, despite her being perfectly bilingual, and although her novels often present French and a mixture of other languages, English remains their main vehicle and they were all published in Britain. This clear choice on Brooke-Rose's part undoubtedly illustrates her wish to address an English-speaking audience.

In light of her participation in the French cultural atmosphere, we could compare Brooke-Rose with some other British writers who present in their work an awareness of the French cultural milieu. The experimentalism of the *nouveau roman*

in fact, significantly influences such authors as John Fowles, Muriel Spark, Rayner Heppenstall, and Giles Gordon, who all share with Brooke-Rose different features.

John Fowles is indebted to the French fiction of the early twentieth century (Marcel Proust and André Gide), and to the new French intellectual environment of the sixties. This is particularly evident in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), as the narrator states that he lives in “the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes” (Fowles 97), and later refers again to the practice of the “theoreticians of the *nouveau roman*” (Fowles 389). Fowles imitates on the one hand the manner of the Victorian novelist, setting his story in the nineteenth-century, while on the other hand he shows himself as an author speaking from the twentieth century. The author intrudes in the story to comment ironically on the events, and to reveal overtly his authorial manipulation:

This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside of my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in [...] a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God [...] But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (Fowles 97)

At the end of the novel, Fowles offers three optional endings among which the reader can choose. Fowles explores in this way the issue of authorial control and plays with the reader's expectations, trying to divest people of their passive reading habits, forcing them to participate in the novel by choosing one of the endings, but also overtly informing them of the fictive status of the story and providing elucidations on the various fictional techniques employed.

Like Brooke-Rose, Muriel Spark began writing in the fifties and her writing shows the influence of the *nouveau roman*. In *The Comforters* (1957), Spark presents a heroine who, working on her novel, is disturbed by an unrelenting sound of typewriting which is attributed to “a writer on another plane of existence” (Spark 63). Caroline will then suspect that someone above herself is arranging her life into “a convenient slick plot” (Spark 104). In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), the heroine seems to be implicitly compared to an author-like figure who constructs the present lives of her characters (her pupils) and shapes their future. Not only does she seem to possess total authorial control over her pupils, but she also determines their lives. In fact, the novel's anticipation of some events seems to have precisely the purpose of showing how Miss Brodie really affects/controls her girls' future. In this

way, the novel shares with the *nouveau roman* and with postmodernism the concern with the nature of writing, as Brodie's strong wilfulness makes her an authorial figure. In the same line, *The Driver's Seat* (1970) presents a protagonist – Lise – who tries to re-appropriate for herself the authorial power of deciding upon her own life and, eventually, death. Spark's novels, and in particular *The Driver's Seat*, strongly reveal the influence of the *nouveau roman* in their objective tone, in their almost obsessive and minute description of objects and surfaces.

The influence of the *nouveau roman* is evident, too, in the writing of Rayner Heppenstall. *The Connecting Door* (1962) shares indeed many of the characteristics of the new novel. Its protagonist is unnamed, in the style of Robbe-Grillet. The novel also presents a meticulous description of objects, notating the minutiae of their surfaces and concentrating on each detail. The narrator seems to be less concerned with action than interested in the observation of buildings and streets. Other main characteristics which show Heppenstall's French influence are the rigorous use of the present tense, and the non-chronological order in the arrangement of events, as the novel concurrently presents two different periods of time. The connecting door of the title seems to be that of time and memory, or else that of different planes of existence: some of the characters, in fact, seem to exist on different plateaus, and at times they seem to be mere projections of the main protagonist's mind. In all this, again, the influence of the *nouveau roman* is evident, as it is also in the time-structure innovation of *Two Moons* (1977), where Heppenstall presents two different stories simultaneously.

In the following decade, another writer whose work shows the influence of the new novel will be Giles Gordon. His *Girl With Red Hair* (1974), resembles the new novel in its description of objects. The novel is written entirely in the second person, like Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957). It also presents an index of characters, which recalls Brooke-Rose's index of narrators in *Thru*.

Another novelist who looks to the French panorama for the development of her fiction is Iris Murdoch. More than to the *nouveau roman*, however, she looks to the French existentialist philosophy of Sartre. The idea of the self-determination of the individual is tackled by Murdoch in many of her novels. The basic assumption of Sartre's philosophy is in a way contrary to what Murdoch does as a writer, i.e.

imposing her patterns on characters. Murdoch, a teacher of philosophy herself, is well aware of this paradox, and her novels often show characters who try to escape from their “puppet master” or from the imposition of meaning from above. This renders Murdoch’s novel an outstanding example of artistic self-consciousness. In particular, in *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), the narratorial figure constantly worries about the morality of imposing his point of view on other people, or of writing the “reality” with words in his journal.

Brooke-Rose’s work clearly shares many features with the above mentioned works. Fowles’ direct allusion to French culture and his technical elucidations will find in *Thru* a significant development, as the work will be constructed to a large extent on allusions to and quotations from the various theories of structuralism and poststructuralism, giving the reader direct information on its textual functioning and techniques. Similarly, in *Thru*, as in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the figure of the author will play with the reader, even if with different modalities. Fowles’ wish to act on the reader’s habits is moreover a basic tenet of Brooke-Rose’s writing.

Spark’s novels parallel Brooke-Rose’s in their objective description of surfaces and inanimate objects, as well as in their concern with the nature of writing and the role of the author. In particular, in *Between*, we will observe an obsessive and minute description of flat, rigid surfaces, while in *Thru* the role of the authorial figure is constantly alluded to but never directly seen by the characters, thus paralleling the author of *The Comforters*, whose faint typing sound Caroline hears. Moreover, the multitude of characters of *Thru* will try to reappropriate for themselves the role of narrators, and decide their stories (and therefore lives), as Lise does in *The Driver’s Seat*. Larissa, for example, will foresee some future events in advance, as if she were inventing them for herself.

Heppenstall’s *The Connecting Door* strongly resembles *Between* in the namelessness of its protagonist, in the scrupulous use of the present tense, in the meticulous description of objects, in the peculiar “lack” of action, and in the predominance of memory and associative mental processes in the structuring of a non-chronological narrative, a narrative where past and present are concurrently presented. The different planes of existence of Heppenstall’s characters will also be

present in *Thru*, where the metadiegetic levels will proliferate to the point that distinguishing among them will be impossible.

I have, up to this moment, delineated the different influences which bear on Brooke-Rose's writing, considered the two cultural panoramas (French and British) in reference to which it should be understood, and drawn the major parallelisms between her work and that of other contemporary writers. In my view, however, Brooke-Rose's writing possesses qualities which transcend any specific set of theories or cultural movement. She cannot be paired *tout court* with the *nouveau roman* in the way many critics have done, especially in the sixties and seventies. Before considering *Between* and *Thru*, therefore, I will tackle the issue of her critical reception during those years and make out the main characteristics of her writing which are distinctively her own and which therefore transcend the French panorama. I will then consider the successive re-evaluation of her work, and define the ways in which this thesis proposes to contribute to an original assessment of her literary practice.

After Brooke-Rose's early four novels, which, as already mentioned, were on the whole welcomed by the critics, the critical response to her works and their success in terms of readership were not very propitious during the sixties and seventies. The novels of her first experimental quartet received scant consideration and were often discarded as too difficult and demanding. For instance, in reviewing *Out*, Francis Hope writes that "Miss Brooke-Rose has trotted out the whole Left Bank box of *trucs* – meaningless confusions, solipsistic riddles, obsessive galaxies of 'objective' scientific terms". Hope shows no attempt to understand the novel in different terms than its difficulty and continues by declaring that it possesses "the virtues of moral nullity and crucifying dullness: it is resplendently unreadable" (Hope 742). The novel had been indeed rejected by Brooke-Rose's first publisher, Secker and Warburg, for its complexity. It was then accepted by Michael Joseph, which also published *Such*, *Between* and the collection of short stories *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*. Although Michael Joseph, being its publisher, writes a slightly more positive review of *Out*, he stresses once more its difficulty. After having summed up the plot of the novel, Joseph explains in fact that "the greater part of the book is concerned with the actual workings of [the protagonist's] mind, and

this, though very ingeniously done, is exhausting and less rewarding” (Joseph 1964 1,033). Even though Joseph clearly praises Brooke-Rose’s “shiningly visible” intelligence, he finally declares that “it is very hard to be certain if one has grasped the point” (Joseph 1964 1,033). In reviewing *Such*, Joseph links it directly to the *nouveau roman* and underlines the effort the reader must be prepared to make if he/she wishes to approach the novel: “*Such* is very much a book for new-novel readers, who are used to this sort of hard work” (Joseph 1966 953). In more negative terms, in assessing *Such*, Seymour-Smith complains,

The cleverness of all this is dazzling, and so are the intellectual implications. The difficulty is that the reader needs to work too hard, intellectually, all the way [...] the whole is too much a stark ideological structure. One wants to work hard on books only when one has enjoyed them, responded to them [...] I admired this novel, but I could not enjoy it. (Seymour-Smith 1966 593)

Neither *Out* nor *Such* sold satisfactorily. As a direct consequence, the print-runs of the subsequent novels became consecutively shorter. *Out* was printed in 3.000 copies, *Such* had 2.500 prints and only 2.000 copies of *Between* were produced.

Between, however, received more positive reviews and sold all the copies. Joseph praises the “glittering surface” of the novel, with its “free-running associations” and “superb multilingual forgings”, stressing its “comic extravaganza” and the very much actual topics of women’s emancipation and global air travel (Joseph 1968 1,218). John Whitley positively depicts *Between* as an interesting mixture of French and British literary features,

The rare achievement of “*Between*” is to put the abstract etymological theorising of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralists into tangibly crumpled light-weight suits, sawdust cafés; for one the characters of a *nouveau roman* are alive and well and living in free association. Better still, they have a sense of humour. (Whitley 1968 62)

Whitley admires Brooke-Rose’s “glinting vein of irony” and defines *Between* “one of the most witty novels” of the contemporary literary panorama. For Whitley, *Between* is a “near-parody” (Whitley 1968 62) of the *nouveau roman*, a mixture of the British farce which the French lack and the ability for linguistic exploitation which the British lack. He thus sees that, while participating of both cultures, the novel also possesses something which transgresses them.

If *Between* was better received, when *Thru* appeared Brooke-Rose was, in her words, “regarded as totally incomprehensible” (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 91). The novel was published by Hamish Hamilton, “with a print-run of 1.500, of which

slightly over half were sold” (Birch 171). The majority of the reviews of *Thru* overtly (and negatively) associated Brooke-Rose to the *nouveau roman*. They did so almost automatically, without trying to recognise what were the features which distinguished *Thru* from the works of the *nouveau romanciers*. The novel’s much more overt connection with French theory engendered in almost all cases a highly hostile critical reception in Britain. As Glyn White clearly sees, “*Thru* convinced the majority that the author had ‘gone too far’” (White 2005 122). For instance, Francis King heavily criticises it by saying,

Thru, with its incomprehensible diagrams, its typographical eccentricities, its repetitions and inconsequentialities, left me wholly baffled. After struggling off and on for a week to unravel its intentions, I suspect that this is the kind of work that ends up on the desks of grateful thesis-writers without passing through the intermediary of many readers’ hands. (King 1975 12)

Thru is certainly not the kind of work to be understood in one week of “off and on” reading, but King does not show any attempt to put more effort in comprehending it, and easily dismisses its “eccentricities” as “incomprehensible”. In similar terms, Michael Mason judges negatively the “topics of linguistics and literary theory [...] approached with characteristically French emphases”. He disapprovingly remarks that most of the book is made up of French academic talk, and doubts whether it is “appropriate to speak of this work as a ‘narrative’, except by courtesy” (Mason 1975 753). Mason is also particularly critical of Brooke-Rose’s photograph displayed on the book cover: for him, the *Saint Laurent* foulard she wears is a clear sign of the author’s wish to consolidate her role as a French academic. Like King’s one, Mason’s review does not show any attempt whatsoever to grasp the novel’s specificity. C. J. Driver also heavily condemns *Thru*: he is “not buying the package”, he tells us, and describes the novel solely in terms of “false and fresh starts and snippets”. For Driver, *Thru* lacks context and voice, and it is only “an English example of French narrative practice” (Driver 1975 14).

The main reason for such a widespread hostile attitude towards the novel seems to be the peculiar sense of insularity still felt by the Anglo-Saxon intellectual world at the time *Thru* was published. The English literary panorama of the period appeared as if closed in itself and looked at what came from other cultural environments as “suspicious”. English critics seemed to be more concerned with defining what were English literature’s specific features, as opposed to what they considered as “foreign”. In view of the fact that Brooke-Rose had been living and

working in France since 1968, writing novels which strongly resembled those of the *nouveau romanciers*, she was easily dismissed as “foreign”, cast aside as “not thoroughly English”. *Thru* was in almost all cases unenthusiastically associated with French experimentalism. An illuminating example of this attitude is given by Peter Ackroyd who, in reviewing the novel, defiantly declares,

Thru is too little, and it is also too late. It tries to do for the English language what Denis Roche and a host of experimentalists did to the French, but *Thru* is neither here nor there. [...] It is very brave of Miss Brooke-Rose to apply certain European strategies to the indigenous product, but like a great many Europeanisms they have a faded date-stamp upon them. The English have missed that particular development of modernism but it is too late to imitate it: we must go beyond. (Ackroyd 1975 52)

Ackroyd criticises *Thru* for its resemblance to “European” experimentalism, for its use of “European strategies”, thus perfectly demonstrating that the hostile reception of the novel derived primarily from the Anglo-centric mind-set of the contemporary British academia. The unsympathetic attitude shown by British critics towards *Thru* is defined by White as “cultural xenophobia”, for there does not appear to be, in their evaluations, “the slightest inclination to get to grips with the text itself”, and the novel is judged solely in relation to the French background it refers to. *Thru* was therefore dismissed as “both un-English and imitative, in the worst literary sense” (White 2005 123).

Differently from King, Mason, Driver and Ackroyd, Frank Kermode praises *Thru*, and his admiration is reported on the dust-jacket of the novel,

If we are ever to experience in English the serious *practice* of narrative as the French have developed it over the last few years, we shall have to attend to Christine Brooke-Rose. There has been writing in English *about* the subject, and even a small amount of timid pastiche; but Christine Brooke-Rose is the sole practitioner of the real thing. Incidentally the word ‘serious’ doesn’t rule out the word ‘funny’. *Thru* is both. (Kermode)

Kermode’s comment was later transcribed on the back of *Amalgamemnon* and of the *Omnibus* edition. However positive his commentary might be, it nevertheless strictly links, once more, Brooke-Rose’s practice to the French cultural panorama, thus again rendering problematical the acceptance of the novel into the English canon.

Although Brooke-Rose’s writing is inextricably connected to the contemporary French critical and literary context, in my view, her experimentalism should not be automatically paired with the *nouveau roman*. The French cultural panorama and literary experimental example undoubtedly stimulated Brooke-Rose and helped her to investigate a new approach to fiction, yet delineating her work *only* with reference

to French fiction would preclude any considerable recognition of her accomplishments. Her experimental writing developed and needs to be understood also in light of her influences, Pound and Beckett, of the new scientific theories considered above, and it is strictly related to the broad trend of social renewal of the sixties in Britain, which engendered on a large scale a rejection of the realist conventions in literature.

Brooke-Rose's writing clearly participates of the British and the French cultural panoramas, but precisely because it stands at the border between one and the other, it becomes a most original synthesis of what these different backgrounds offer her. Her writing practice becomes a crossroad, "a junction where many roads converge" (Canepari-Labib 22). If we wish to "place" Brooke-Rose, therefore, we need to consider the many influences and stimuli which bear on her practice, as I have done above (structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, *nouveau roman*, scientific theories, Pound, Beckett, British cultural innovation in the sixties). However, these considerations alone still cannot account for some of the most distinctive features of her work, for her writing also developed in light of her personal ideas and biographical circumstances.

In fact, it cannot be omitted that her experience of bilingualism has played a basic role in her fictional practice. Brooke-Rose's multilingualism can be seen, in Del Sapio Garbero's words, as a "privileged biographical condition", one which has permitted Brooke-Rose to live and work in France from 1968 onwards, although she continued writing in English. Her bilingualism has therefore allowed her to live and "work between cultures, exploiting precisely the space of contiguity between the frontiers and discourses" (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 96). As Randall Stevenson explains,

No author aware of two or more literary traditions can remain unquestioningly content with the conventions of any one of them. Contact with another culture and literature helps create for writers a sense of the character and limitations of their own, encouraging the pursuit of alternatives and possibilities of innovation and change. For writers anywhere, awareness of languages and cultures other than their own therefore encourages the self-conscious questioning. (Stevenson 1993 135)

Brooke-Rose's novels, in fact, draw features from both the British and the French cultures, yet they always present something which *exceeds* one or the other. This "something" is the profound awareness of the *other* culture. Brooke-Rose's fictional works possess both a *deep understanding of* and a *crucial distance from* the

English and the French cultures. They present a constant awareness of the other way of looking at any given issue. The author never accepts passively the ideas and theories she tackles in her works, but always handles them critically, looking at them from an estranged perspective. This perspective derives precisely from her being both an “insider” and a “stranger” to the culture which heralds those ideas or produces those theories. The constant presentation of *opposite* viewpoints in her novels, the steady awareness of the other point of view, clearly stimulates the reader to see things from a different angle and to reject dogmatism and fundamentalism. For instance, we will see how *Between* exemplifies some of the basic tenets of Irigaray’s *écriture féminine*, while also surpassing them in the positing of a non-exclusive feminine subject. Similarly, *Thru* endorses the French poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories, but it approaches them with a pervasive tongue-in-cheek attitude which reveals the author’s peculiar stance, one which is both connected to and removed from the French critical environment. As we will see, in *Thru* we find not only a reflection of the critical theories which developed in France at the end of the sixties, but also and most importantly an attitude of *demystification* towards those theories, an attitude which aims at *exposing* their inherent dogmatism. There is, in Brooke-Rose, always something which does not fit into one or the other cultural traditions. There is, as Canepari-Labib sees, a “feeling of not belonging to either French or British culture” (Canepari-Labib 19). Any attempt to see her writing within the limits of one national context or another inevitably fails: her novels remain defiantly personal and original, for they linger on the border between cultures, exploiting precisely the space between them.

Another distinctive feature of Brooke-Rose’s narrative practice is the omnipresent linguistic inventiveness of her novels, at the basis of which lies not merely her bilingualism, but also and most importantly her deep linguistic competence. The profound awareness of how distinct languages work derives certainly from the fact that the author studied philology and is a literary critic and theoretician. This knowledge has permitted Brooke-Rose to develop her writing in original directions, precisely because of her understanding of the structure and functioning of different languages. Brooke-Rose is deeply interested in the ways languages can be played on, in the infinite possibilities they offer to create each time

something new: “I must twist language in some way to pass the frontier, and that’s the pleasure” (Turner 1990b 31), she asserts significantly. Her novels constantly play with and explore the possibilities given by the interaction of idioms. The thorough understanding of more than one language produces in the subject a critical *distance* to each one language, thus permitting them to better comprehend their mechanism and functioning, and consequently offering them the opportunity to play with different structures and usages, and with what they entail in terms of cultural attitudes. In *Between*, in particular, there is a constant attention at the different outlooks generated by different languages’ structures. Apart from *Between*, linguistic puns are ubiquitous in Brooke-Rose’s narrative: her linguistic competence is one of the basic sources of her literary approach and indelibly shapes all her novels.

However, the multilingual aspect of Brooke-Rose’s novels does not exhaust her innovative narrative practice. Another feature which strongly concurs to shape her fiction and renders it distinctive is her highly *technical* attitude towards writing. The expert understanding of technical matters in literature, of narrative structures and their functioning, deeply informs all her works. Yet, the criticism of Brooke-Rose’s fiction has often failed to formalize her writing technique in precise terms. The peculiar narrative devices she employs have often been overlooked by critics, as the author herself has lamented (Cf. Brooke-Rose 2002b 6-15). If form and content are complementary aspects of each literary work, in the case of Brooke-Rose’s novels, the analysis of their form appears to be the first and compulsory step for their overall appreciation. Her works should be approached first of all by considering and understanding their technical features, rather than by simply looking at their content. Overlooking the form of Brooke-Rose’s novels and considering them only in light of their content, would make us inevitably miss their most distinctive traits: their theoretical issues are inextricably linked to their technical characteristics and can be fully appreciated only in relation to them.

In each of her novels since *Out*, Brooke-Rose employs specific constraints which irremediably shape her texts and affect both the writing and the reading practices. A narrative constraint, or lipogram (from the Greek *lepein*, remove, and *gramma*, letter or writing), is a self-imposed omission. Although “invisible”, it produces in the reader a feeling of unfamiliarity which, in Brooke-Rose’s intention,

should gradually lead to the pleasure of recognition and consequently to a greater enjoyment of the reading practice. However, this has not been the general case with her novels. Readers have frequently dismissed her “unfamiliar” texts, incapable of welcoming their originality: “the pleasure of recognition being generally stronger than the pleasure or puzzlement of discovery” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 1). Instead of being recognised for her innovative contribution, the author has often gained the label of “difficult”.

Brooke-Rose’s major lipogram, the one she has used almost steadily from the moment she started experimenting and which constitutes the main feature of her narrative technique, is the avoidance of the narrative past tense in favour of a “simultaneous” or “scientific” present tense, as already considered above. If Brooke-Rose was directly influenced by Robbe-Grillet in her use of the present tense, she nevertheless develops this lipogram and plays upon its possible uses in her own original way. In *Between*, for instance, she combines the present tense with another constraint, the lack of the verb *to be*. These two features together concur to render the idea of a for-ever-on-the-move “non-identity”. In *Thru*, she further develops the technique of the *nouveau roman* – which focused obsessively on *one* perceptive consciousness – and uses the present tense for expressing a multitude of ceaselessly shifting viewpoints. The effect of this is that the reader can only try to identify the “consciousness of the moment” by means of the context. Moreover, due to the constant use of the present tense, the stories within stories which multiply in *Thru* are reduced to one single, immense narration, where intertextuality loses its diachronic dimension. In *Amalgamemnon*, Brooke-Rose makes almost exclusive use of non-realised tenses such as the future, the conditional, the subjunctive and the imperative. In *Remake*, she avoids personal pronouns and possessive adjectives. This abolishes “possessive” problems and creates a peculiar textual instability, in particular because the novel “should” be an autobiographical work. In *Next*, she avoids using the verb *to have* because of the topic treated: homeless people do not own anything and the lack of such a verb strongly concurs to render the feeling of their existential status.

Abolishing the verb *to be*, the verb *to have*, pronouns and possessive adjectives, or using only non-realised tenses, means doing away with the some of the most “stable” features of language. The employment of such lipograms determines

the specificity of the narratives and shakes off the stability of the conventional text. The reader of Brooke-Rose's novels experiences a strange effect of unfamiliarity at the textual use of language. The reading is unavoidably slowed down by these invisible constraints, and the reader is forced to be more attentive to the actual words on the page. This is exactly one of the declared aims of Brooke-Rose, that of making the reader "stop and think", (Brooke-Rose 2002b 153), an intent she clearly shares with Pound and to which we will come back in our last chapter. Other peculiar technical features of Brooke-Rose's writing are her wide-ranging employment of metaphor, already observed above, and the typographical display which we will particularly appreciate in *Thru*.

The constant awareness of different cultures and different ways of looking at a same topic, the omnipresent linguistic inventiveness of her novels, and the deep technical knowledge employed in them, are therefore the main characteristics which, in my view, render Brooke-Rose distinctive within the cultural panorama(s) of the period. These features have given life to highly unconventional texts which cannot be reduced to any set literary movement, for they transcend both French or the British cultures.

Notwithstanding their original characteristics, Brooke-Rose's first four experimental novels – and particularly *Thru* – did not attract much positive criticism and were read almost solely in relation to the *nouveau roman*, as already seen. Apart from the peculiar sense of insularity felt by the Anglophonic world during the sixties and seventies, another reason why Brooke-Rose did not initially receive the critical attention she deserved derives probably from her being a woman writer and, what is more, an experimental one. In fact, although the women's liberation movement gained more and more strength in the sixties, and although the decade engendered a much more liberal attitude towards issues of gender, it was still difficult for a woman writer to break through the wall of a canonical literature which continued to be largely male-dominated. The author herself, looking back over her career, admits having had difficulties as a woman *experimental* writer (Cf. Friedman and Fuchs 81), and in her critical essay "Illiterations", she specifically expounds on the difficulties women writers encounter in having their work assessed as the object of serious literary critical attention. She explains that there are "different types and levels of

critical attention, on a sliding scale that can be subsumed in the general opposition canonical/non canonical”, and that the level of attention granted to women writers generally tends to be less serious than that offered to male authors (Brooke-Rose 1991 250). Moreover, Brooke-Rose continues, although it is difficult for a woman writer to enter the canon, it is more difficult for a woman *experimental* writer to be accepted as experimental. Traditionally, in fact, women have been considered as only capable of *imitating* male criteria, not able to create new forms: “the divine and metaphoric power of producing one thing out of another thing through the word is deeply felt as a male power”. As a consequence, a woman writer “must either use traditional forms or, if she dare experiment, she must be imitating an already old model” (Brooke-Rose 1991 258, 262). Consequently, women writers who “dare” experiment, who try to look in new ways at the reality around themselves and reread/rewrite their world, are rarely treated on the same level of seriousness as their male counterparts (Cf. Brooke-Rose 1991 261).

After the negative reception of *Thru*, Brooke-Rose stopped publishing fiction for nine years. In 1984, *Amalgamemnon* was much better received, probably because it did not present the extreme experimentation of *Thru*, but also because the suspicious attitude towards foreign experimentation widely spread in the English academic world up until the seventies had started changing from the beginning of the eighties. The concept of “English literature” had been expanding as more and more non-strictly British novelists had chosen to write in English. The Anglo-centric bias which was still very much alive in the seventies had therefore started to give way to a more international attitude in English universities and critical forums. Today’s situation is radically different: especially during the last decades of the twentieth century, novelists who come from former English colonial territories such as Timothy Mo, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie and Chinua Achebe – to name but a few – have addressed the British audience. Post-colonial literature has emerged out of the collapse of the Empire and has acquired a place within the now much wider definition of “English literature”. In the meanwhile, highly unconventional postmodernist writers such as Angela Carter, Alasdair Gray and many others have more and more affirmed themselves on the literary scene. Moreover, in the eighties, the awareness of the poststructuralist critical debate had largely expanded and the

French theories of the sixties and seventies were much more widely known and accepted in British literary circles. Finally, the bias against women writers – still very much alive during the fifties and sixties – was being gradually overcome as more and more women writers from the seventies onwards were being widely recognised for their important and crucial literary contributions.

All this, together with Brooke-Rose's attempt towards more readability from *Amalgamemnon* onwards, engendered a thorough reconsideration of Brooke-Rose's writing. *Amalgamemnon* received in almost all cases positive and constructive reviews. For instance, Marshall talks in particular of its "delight in language and word-play that attracts the pejorative label of 'experimental'" and disapproves of the British prevailing critical attitude for which "authors should not display too much inventiveness and intelligence or be influenced by the French modes if British" (Marshall 1984 2,159). Marshall thus overtly addresses the hidden prejudice which had been working against Brooke-Rose up to that moment. Similarly, Brian Morton praises *Xorandor* and again condemns the Anglo-centric prejudice perpetuated against Brooke-Rose's former novels, while trying to re-situate the author into the English tradition: "Brooke-Rose has been quietly dismissed as an unEnglish figure, disturbingly cerebral and 'experimental'. But she resembles Robbe-Grillet less than Ivy Compton-Burnett" (Morton 767).

All the novels from *Amalgamemnon* onwards did, on the whole, receive more positive reviews upon their appearance, with only a few exceptions: Turner, for instance, describes *Verbivore* as "old-fashioned and backward-looking" and defiantly declares that the author "falls between too many stools" (Turner 1990a 91). Turner also makes clear that "among general readers [Brooke-Rose] is thought of, if at all, as a sterile academic prankster, not for the likes of you or me" (Turner 1990a 91).

It needs be said, however, that even when praise of the later novels occurs, the bias against the theoretical aspects of Brooke-Rose's previous texts, and in particular against the supposed difficulty of *Thru*, appears to be still very much alive at this point in time. Thomas Disch, for example, praises *Xorandor*, but he does so only for the novel appears to be much simpler and more straightforward than the preceding ones. Recalling Francis King's judgement, Disch describes the works of Brooke-Rose's first tetralogy as novels which "only very earnest Ph.D. candidates are likely

to mistake for good prose” (Disch 10). His judgement, thus, clearly reveals an enduring negative attitude towards Brooke-Rose’s former novels.

Gradually, however, Brooke-Rose has been recognised by more and more critics as an important writer. She has been compared with Anthony Burgess for her linguistic inventiveness (Cf. Disch 10), with Brigid Brophy for her typographical display (Cf. Stevenson 1986 212), with B. S. Johnson for her technical constraints and typographical display (Cf. White 2005 120), and with John Fowles for her exposure of the relationship between reality and fiction (Cf. Clute 52).

Though not *unanimously* acknowledged as one of the most innovative contemporary writers, many critics have, in the last thirty years, addressed Brooke-Rose’s writing and considered it in positive terms. The volumes *Breaking the Sequence* (1989), edited by Friedman and Fuchs, and *Utterly Other Discourse* (1995), edited by Friedman and Martin, collect a series of constructive articles on Brooke-Rose’s work. Judy Little’s work *The Experimental Self* (1996) dedicates an insightful chapter to Brooke-Rose. Among the critics who have contributed to Brooke-Rose’s revaluation with various intuitive essays are also Maria Del Sapio Garbero, Hanjo Berressem, Damian Grant, Annegret Maack, Francesco Minetti, and Susan Rubin Suleiman.

Many of the critics mentioned above have tended to approach Brooke-Rose’s practice through the lenses of feminist theories. They have considered it mostly in terms of feminist issues. However, in my view, Brooke-Rose cannot be viewed solely within the bounds of feminism. Defining her as a feminist writer would preclude the full recognition of her accomplishments. Many critics have failed to consider the way Brooke-Rose’s novels present a critique of the widespread militant feminist attitude of the sixties and seventies. It is true that in Brooke-Rose’s works the reference to the position of women in a masculine society is insistent and the viewpoint adopted in many of her novels is significantly that of a female character. It is also true that – as we will see – the language of *Between* exemplifies the *écriture féminine* Irigaray theorised. Brooke-Rose, however, does not appear to share the perspective of most militant feminists who insist on having their works viewed only in terms of women writing. *Between*, in fact, is concerned with analysing the possibilities of expressing one’s own identity in a masculine language, but the

problem the text confronts is less that of expressing one's own *feminine* identity, than that of expressing one's own *creativity*. In other words, creativity is seen as being inherently feminine, but not necessarily biologically so, and the novel's protagonist, as we will see, is presented more as an *androgynous* creature than as a strictly female one. In contrast to the feminist separatist attitude, Brooke-Rose does not seem to postulate an equality between the biological sex of the speaker (and the author) and *écriture féminine*. While militant feminists such as Friedan or Cixous concentrate exclusively on feminist issues, trying to define an aesthetic of feminism, Brooke-Rose is more concerned with *deconstructing* the binary opposition between masculine and feminine, as she does indeed in *Between*. The author thus seems to share Kristeva's idea that *écriture féminine* can exist in both masculine and feminine writings. This will also appear clear in *Thru*, which utterly deconstructs the idea of gender identity by showing how man and woman are both subject and object of desire in their relationship with the opposite sex.

As a result, if we wish to define the way Brooke-Rose's could be considered as a feminist writer, we have to stress the *balance* her work tries to strike between the two opposite attitudes of the first and second waves of feminism. As Kristeva explains, the first two extreme phases of feminism respectively struggled for a "logic of identification", i.e. for women's *total* equality to men, and emphasised the uniquely feminine, seeking women's radical difference from men, (Kristeva 1986 194). For Kristeva, on the contrary, it is important that women find a balance between these two opposite poles, asking for identity and difference at the same time, or better re-conceiving the notions of identity and difference and their relationship, refusing to choose one over the other. Indeed, the very notion of identity should be deconstructed in order to allow individual difference: "the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*" (Kristeva 1986 209). In line with Kristeva, Brooke-Rose believes that a separatist stance on the feminist side is far from being a helpful approach to the gender issue. Writers, she explains, should be evaluated for what they write, not interpreted in the light of their sex. For Brooke-Rose, therefore, women and men should write in their own ways, without further problematizing the issue of their gender (Cf. Del Sapio Garbero 1991 101-3).

Other academics, such as Patricia Waugh and Brian McHale, have addressed the novels of Brooke-Rose and contributed to their revaluation. In her work *Metafiction* (1984), Waugh considers the metafictional nature and the self-referentiality of *Thru* and defines the novel as a “critical commentary in the novel form itself” (Waugh 1984 147-48). McHale analyses both the system of metalepses of *Thru* and its spatial displacement in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), and engages with Brooke-Rose’s *oeuvre* more comprehensively in his *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992).

More recently, Slomith Rimmon-Kenan and Glyn White have crucially contributed to the reassessment of Brooke-Rose’s novels, and in particular of *Thru*. In *A Glance beyond Doubt* (1996), Rimmon-Kenan extensively deals with the question of representation in *Thru* and positions Brooke-Rose within the postmodernist literary panorama for the intricate relationship between language and reality the novel puts forward, for its metalanguage, intertextuality and graphic display. White’s interesting article on *Thru*, which appeared in *Poetics Today* (White 2002) has been more recently followed by a very insightful chapter in her work *Reading the Graphic Surface* (2005), in which *Thru*’s typographical tricks are fully and deeply tackled and appreciated. White demonstrates how *Thru*’s graphic display, rather than being a gratuitous and “incomprehensible” show, is inextricably linked to the issues the novel tackles, and cannot be abstracted from when interpreting it.

There have been also two monographic publications on Brooke-Rose’s writing, that of Sarah Birch, and that of Michela Canepari-Labib. These works show a definite attempt to illustrate the distinctive characteristics of her narrative practice and understand Brooke-Rose in much wider and label-escaping terms. In particular, Canepari-Labib asserts the impossibility to place Brooke-Rose within any set literary movement.

A huge progress has therefore been made by the works mentioned above. However, I agree with Kermode when he says that “it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that the originality and skills of Brooke-Rose deserve a greater measure of admiration and respect than we have so far chosen to accord them” (Kermode 2006 17). In my view, what still needs to be tackled more deeply and in the specific is the *distinctiveness* of *each single work* by Brooke-Rose. This is particularly true in the

case of *Thru*, which, as White declares, “still needs to be read” (White 2005 123). Birch’s and Canepari-Labib’s are all-inclusive monographs which have, on the one hand, the merit of accounting for all of her novels, but, on the other hand, for this same reason they necessarily allot a limited space to each one of them. That is why I have decided to restrict my attention on her first tetralogy, and in particular on *Between* and *Thru*. With my work, I wish to offer the first full-length account of these two novels, taking advantage of a space which otherwise would have been much more limited. Focusing specifically on *Between* and *Thru*, I have tried to provide an all-encompassing analysis of these works, which would not have been possible if I had to analyse all of her novels in the space at my disposal. Moreover, Brooke-Rose’s fictional works from *Amalgamemnon* onwards have been better received by both public and critics, and an attempt has been made to consider them not only in relation to the French cultural panorama. *Between*, on the contrary, has been too often read solely in terms of feminist writing or for its relation to the *nouveau roman*, while *Thru* has suffered from a negative attitude towards its demanding nature and has been always automatically associated to the French panorama. As White clearly sees, *Thru* is, more than any other novel by the author, “responsible for the perception of Brooke-Rose as a difficult writer” (White 2005 122). I therefore felt the need to (1) show the peculiarities of *Between* as distinct from both *nouveau roman* and feminist writing, and (2) call for a revaluation of Brooke-Rose’s difficulty in relation to *Thru*, which still suffers from the negative widespread judgement of “too difficult and demanding”.

Most importantly, as I will show in the last chapter, in my view, only *Between* and *Thru* can be defined as “critical fiction” or “fictional criticism”. I therefore wish to bring the attention on this specific characteristic of these two novels, a characteristic which has been often misinterpreted and never properly considered.

In order to better tackle the issues which *Between* and *Thru* call into question, I have decided to trace the development of Brooke-Rose’s experimentalism, from her early and still quite conventional works, through her initial approach to experimentalism with *Out* and *Such*, to her first two *fully* experimental novels. *Thru*, in particular, represents the *climax* of Brooke-Rose’s experimentalism and offers a matchless illustration of what I define her countertendential writing practice. In the

last chapter, in fact, I will show how *Thru* anticipates issues which were to be at the centre of the theoretical debate many years later. For this reason, *Thru*, more than any other novel by Brooke-Rose, can be defined as a unique instance “fictional criticism” or “critical fiction”.

In terms of actually “placing” Brooke-Rose’s writing, I will on the one hand parallel it to the wide trend of postmodernist fiction for its clear addressing of poststructural and deconstructive theories, and for its characteristics of self-reflexivity, intertextuality, parody, visual display and pastiche. However, my aim will be less that of setting her within the limits of such a literary trend, than that of showing how the author always succeeds in escaping its boundaries. If we want to situate Brooke-Rose’s writing within the postmodern debate, we necessarily have to better consider the main implications of the long and exhausting debate which evolved around the term from the seventies onwards. I will do so in the final chapter and consider, in light of this debate, the specific way we can place Brooke-Rose “within” the postmodernist trend. In fact, far from assimilating her writing to postmodernism, I will show how the former possesses characteristics which render it *countertendential* to some of the major tenets of postmodernism.

Different labels have been thrust upon Brooke-Rose’s work – *nouveau roman*, feminist, postmodernist – yet they all are, I believe, incapable of providing a full acknowledgment of her achievements. I fundamentally agree with Brooke-Rose when she ironically dismisses any pigeonholing critical label as “sadly devoid of content” (Brooke-Rose 1981, 311) or “useful boxes to put authors into” (Brooke-Rose 1991 262). If, in the author’s view, labels always “hide more than they reveal” (Blumberg 6), this is the more so in the case of her own work: any kind of label we could try to thrust upon her writing would unavoidably “hide more than reveal” its specificities. The main aim of this investigation will be thus to reevaluate Brooke-Rose’s writing by showing both the points of contact between Brooke-Rose and the *nouveau roman*, feminist writing or postmodernism, and the *individual features* of her work, those features which distinguish her novels from any set literary trend. Her experimentalism cannot be limited within the bounds of a specific movement, for it bears connotations which render it a chameleonic and “label escaping” one.

Chapter 2

Between a fundamental disbelief in words and a passionate concern with language

In my analysis of *Between*, I will start considering its genesis, outlining its “plot” and examining its innovative narrative technique, which is not only inextricably linked to its issues, but also ineluctably shapes them. Indeed, my considerations about the *form* of the novel will “automatically” call attention to the way *Between* addresses and critically responds to many of the literary theories which were gaining ground on the international academic scene. Brooke-Rose’s text proves in fact to be a most innovative work in relation to the theories of such figures as Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva and Irigaray.

However, for an internal discursive economy, I have chosen to deal extensively only with some of the theories the text addresses and puts into practice, specifically Barthes’ death of the author and pleasure in reading in the present chapter, and Irigaray’s *écriture féminine* in the next one. My choice has indeed been dictated by the necessity of lengthily dealing with the other theories in light of my analysis of *Thru*. In fact, the theories of Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva are much more directly addressed in *Thru* as compared to *Between*. Consequently, exhaustively treating those theories in this section would have somewhat lessened the idea of the inextricable connection of *Thru* to them, whereas stressing their implications twice would have resulted in redundancy for the overall structure of my investigation.

The Barthesian concepts of the text of pleasure and the death of the author are addressed and enacted by the narrative corpus of the discourses in *Between*, whereas Brooke-Rose’s presentation of the novel’s main character and her use of language connect directly to Irigaray’s theories of female identity and language. Yet, as we will see, there is a basic difference between Irigaray’s theories and Brooke-Rose’s ideas as regards the use of a specific *feminine* language, which will help us understand the relation of the author to the feminist movement. We will see not only how *Between* puts itself in strict relation to these theories, but also and above all, how it critically responds to them.

If many are the points in common between the novel and the contemporary literary theories, the author never fails to refigure their theorisations by crucially

distancing herself from them in some respects, so as to achieve her own personal and original solutions. So “masqueraded” in the fictional thread of her work, Brooke-Rose’s significant contribution to the debate of those years has yet failed to be recognised in all its strength. What I wish to make clear is the value of *Between* as a contribution to that debate, as a part of the overall discussion on identity (here specifically feminine) and a language which could be able to express that identity. Moreover, it is important to note how, while “theorists were theorising”, Brooke-Rose, in a way pulling herself apart of that dispute, decided to approach its issues in a different way, by means of experimenting with what was the central focus of that debate, language and novel writing.

Brooke-Rose started working at *Between* in 1964, but experiencing a sort of block in drawing the novel’s central character, she put the manuscript aside to resume it about three years later, after the appearance of *Such*, and finally published it in 1968. The novel was mostly written during the author’s stay at the castle of Ezra Pound’s daughter – Mary de Rachewiltz – in the Italian Tyrol. It is dedicated to Eva Hesse,³ “with love and gratitude” (B 393). Brooke-Rose deeply appreciated Hesse’s German translation of Pound’s *Cantos* (Hesse 1964) and wrote the critical essay “Cheng Ming Chi’ I’d” (Brooke-Rose 1991 123-142) for Hesse’s work.

Between’s central consciousness is a woman who works as an interpreter, translating from French into German and constantly travelling from conference to conference among several countries. She is unnamed and most of the novel sees no personal pronoun referring to her. She is said to be born in France, by a French mother and a German father who has left both her and her mother. After a Catholic upbringing in France, at the age of fifteen she is sent to Nuremberg to live for a year with some relatives and learn German. During this period, she wins a scholarship and therefore protracts her visit for another year. She then further prolongs her stay due to an illness. In the meanwhile however, World War II breaks out and the block of the frontiers compels her to remain in Nazi Germany, where she starts working as a translator for the German Censorship office and obtains a degree in Medieval and Modern French studies. After the war, she marries an English officer and works at

³ Eva Hesse (1936-1970). In 1964, Hesse spent over a year living in Kettwig-am-Ruhr, Germany, and intermittently travelling to Italy, France and Switzerland. It is in this period that Brooke-Rose probably met the artist.

translating German documents for the occupying forces. As her marriage eventually breaks up, she returns to France and works as an interpreter from French into German. In the course of time she gives up her job and after many years she decides to resume it. By now being a middle-aged woman, she works with far younger colleagues. Among her earlier fellow-workers, she meets again only Siegfried, interpreter from English into German, who is an occasional lover of hers. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Siegfried travels less and less and eventually marries, settles down and has a child.

In order to obtain the annulment of her marriage, the interpreter has undertaken a case with the Roman Sacra Rota. The case lasts many years, after which she wins and obtains the annulment. She has various lovers but she does not remarry. She even carries on a platonic correspondence with an old colleague, Bertrand, who tries to kindle her feminine vanity with passionate love letters in French and Provençal. However, when the two finally meet, disappointment ensues in the interpreter for she fails to find him as she would have expected on the basis of his letters, thus acknowledging the gap between his words and reality.

Constantly travelling, the interpreter has two *pieds-à-terre*, a rented flat in Paris and a small cottage in Wiltshire. In the last pages of the novel, we are presented with her decision to sell her English cottage and maintain only the French residence for her non-working periods. In addition, tired of travelling by plane, she buys a car and travels, revisiting some of the places linked to her past experiences, such as Nuremberg or Munich, finding them significantly altered. The novel ends with the interpreter going back to work and travelling again by plane between countries.

I have utilised the term “plot” in commas for the novel presents no story line in the traditional sense, there exists no temporal linearity, no chain of events diachronically developing one after another. This non-linearity is determined by Brooke-Rose’s highly innovative narrative technique, i.e. by her specific use of the present tense, by the constraints she adopts and by the mix of discourses that make up the novel. The entire text is in fact made up of different discourses intertwining with each other and giving no sense of the linear development of the story. Each discourse does not present a beginning and an end, but endlessly blends into the next, comes back and vanishes again throughout the text. Most of the narration takes place

without any comma intruding to “regulate” it, so that the reader is caught up in the flow of discourse and pauses their reading only when (and if) a full stop suspends it. After defining *Between* a “metastory, with metacharacters”, the author ironically and significantly states, “*Between* deals with (?), explores (?), represents (?), plays around with (?), makes variations on (?), expresses (?), communicates (?), is about (?), generates (?)” (Brooke-Rose 1991 6). The battery of question marks here could be viewed as an ironical reference to the most widely spread critical movements. Brooke-Rose seems to be dismissing any single theoretical approach to her literary work, from Positivism to poststructuralism, from Romanticism to Generative Grammar. It is almost as if she were stating that, whichever the critical procedure to analyse *Between* might be, the key insight of the novel is multiple and impossible to be found from one fixed point of view.

The texts the protagonist is translating simultaneously during conferences, mix up with discourses from her private life, such as love letters, dialogues with her various lovers, small travel talks in different languages, or reminiscences and various thoughts that blend in her mind. The circumstances of her life are presented solely in the form of such different discourses. She is never presented as being at a precise time in a specific place, or as making something concrete and definite. What we read are her own perceptions of the world around her, inextricably mingled and confused with her memories and thoughts. For this peculiar reason we cannot talk of “plot” as meant in the traditional sense of a story linearly developing in time and space in conformity with a causal logic of events, nor can we identify the interpreter with the traditional notion of “protagonist”. I will therefore define the interpreter variously as “centre of consciousness”, “central consciousness” or else “perceiving consciousness”. Whenever I use the terms “protagonist” or “character”, these will not be meant as bearing conventional connotations.

Inextricably linked to the peculiar mix of discourses the novel is made up of, is the “free-ranging” syntax. In fact, the construction of the discourses in *Between* is such that a sentence which starts in “one” place and time and concerns a specific issue, leads the reader to another point both in time, place and topic concerned.

Some critics have read the peculiar structure of the work as an altogether lack of plot. For instance, Richard Martin refers to the recurrent phrase “no one does

anything at all” (B 474) to support his view that in the text there is “no plot worth speaking of [...] rather the novel confronts the reader with a series of repetitious monologues” (Martin 116). In my view, however, *Between* replaces the disrupted conventional linearity of its story-line with its repetitive structure. In the course of the text, events and discourses come back several times, slightly varied, giving the reader the possibility to “reconstruct” the basic plot of the novel.

Between is entirely written in what we have already described as Scientific Present Tense, an impersonal, objective, single-visioned present tense. There is no “narrator” as traditionally conceived and there is no “addressee” the narrator refers to. The author puts herself inside the interpreter’s consciousness to represent objectively what she experiences, her “unreflective” awareness. In other words, everything around her – the people and the situations she encounters, the discourses she hears, and the thoughts which arise in her mind – is represented from the point of view of her unreflective consciousness. Her consciousness is “unreflective” in the sense that the interpreter does not stop and reflect on her thoughts or actions, that there is no narrator which filters narration through his/her own point of view, and that is why Brooke-Rose calls it “scientific speakerless” or else “objectified narratorless mode” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 58). The moments of mimesis are rendered in dialogues, interjections, and the interpreter’s peculiar unreflective “inner speech”. The effect of this technique on the reader is that they can only “reconstruct” the consciousness’s experiences from what she observes around her and from the moments of direct mimesis. The narrative is speakerless in the sense that nothing but context occurs to show who is speaking: a “free direct” discourse which shows no separate narrative voice from that of the character, but where the character is not narrating.

Brooke-Rose’s text seems thus to enact Barthes’ idea of “The Death of the Author”, the practice for which, in a modern text, the author is removed and “the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (Barthes 1977 142). *Between* seems to embody the idea that “the whole of the enunciation is an empty process” (Barthes 1977 145), as there is obviously no narrator the reader is

aware of⁴. It is language itself which speaks, the “origin” of every voice is irrecoverable, writing becomes “the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (Barthes 1977 142), the very act of delivering a discourse becomes the object of a modern text,

writers today are attempting to [...] transpose narrative from the purely constative plane [...] to the performative plane, whereby the meaning of an utterance is the very act by which it is uttered [...] part of contemporary literature is no longer descriptive, but transitive, striving to accomplish so pure a present in its language that the whole of the discourse is identified with the act of its delivery. (Barthes 1977 114)

I will now focus on the peculiar way the circumstances of the central consciousness’ life are presented in the form of purposefully heterogeneous discourses and furnish some examples of this practice. In the course of the novel we hear several voices and dialogues coming from the interpreter’s childhood, such as from when she played with other children in front of her house in Lyon, their game inevitably ending up into quarrels,

- Vieille poire!
- Crapaude!
- Créatine! (B 437)

More than once in the course of the novel the reader is presented with parts of dialogues between the interpreter as a child and her mother,

- Maman.
- Oui?
- Tu m’aimes?
- Mais bien sûr ma poupée.
- Autant que moi j’t’aime ?
- Plus.
- Moi j’t’aime grand comme le ciel.
- Eh bien moi aussi. (B 523)

While providing the reader with the information that the novel’s central consciousness went for a period to school in Nazi Germany and she was homesick, we are directly presented with pastiche-sentences partly deriving from the history lessons the little girl attended at that period, “Der Fuehrer aber hat geschrieben that the gangling girl [...] feels homesick long for was FRANKreich” (B 520). The same technique is used to inform us of her first kiss to a boy who was her cousin Helmut,

⁴ However, Brooke-Rose does not share entirely the extreme “logic” of the death of the author. The “implied” or “encoded” author is a necessary narrative instance which “must” be present in the text, even if “invisible”. We will consider this issue in our sixth chapter and see how, if *Between* seems to perfectly embody the idea of the death of the author, *Thru* makes a significant step forward in that not only does it address that debate, but also enhances its speculations in its very fictional practice, reinstating the importance of the encoded author for the interpretation of a text.

son of her “Tante Frieda” (B 523), “I’ll marry you when I grow up. Says Helmut the young boy Baron [...] kiss first time” (B 490). Again, the questioning she was submitted to by Nazi officers is directly offered throughout the text: “You must forgive these questions Fräulein but in view of your French upbringing we must make sure of your undivided loyalty” (B 489). The one obsessive question her various lovers ask her is repeated several times all through the novel, and we are told that she never answers this question; in this way the reader is informed that even though she has numerous lovers, she never reciprocates their feelings,

don’t you love me even a little? The same question everywhere goes unanswered on crowded trains to Nürnberg for Urlaub or elsewhere in dark streets after cinemas in dim-lit restaurants canteens according to the partner. (B 529)

An example which will help to show how all of the interpreter’s perceptive stimuli emerge from the text mingled together could be the passage where pieces of love letters in French from her ex-colleague get amalgamated with advertisement clichés,

Votre déodorant. Choisissez-le sérieusement chez votre pharmacien. The letter gets folded down. Les questions que vous n’osez pas poser à votre gynécologue [...] The letter gets unfolded. Oh mon amour, me donneriez-vous peut-être un signe? Je n’ose même plus y croire. Et pourtant jour et nuit je rêve je pense à vous, oh ma princesse lointaine. (B 541)

The blend of discourses is further enhanced by the novel’s peculiar mix of languages. The centre of consciousness of *Between* can speak French, German and English. If the basic text is written in English, we often find sentences and pieces of discourses in the other two idioms. However, a wide range of other languages also combine in the novel, i.e. those of the various countries the interpreter travels through: Polish, modern Greek, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Czechoslovak, Russian, Rumanian, all merge in the course of the narrative. Brooke-Rose explains that apart from the idioms the interpreter can speak, the other languages in the novel are meant to render the sense of disorientation of a traveller who cannot speak the language of the country he/she is in,

it’s written in English, so the basic convention is English. The other languages are used to show that she doesn’t know every language in the world. They block the text [...] Things like “exit” in Polish, people don’t necessarily recognize it. So I’m playing with disorientation, the disorientation of travel, we’ve all had it. (Friedman and Fuchs 84)

Such a feeling of disorientation, rendered through a multitude and mixture of languages, is experienced both by the centre of consciousness in *Between* and by its reader. “She may be trilingual, but she doesn’t know everything, she has the same

disorientation that every traveller has” (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 90), says Christine Brooke-Rose about the interpreter, which is in fact depicted as existing suspended in a condition of “betweenness”, perpetually moving between countries, languages and frontiers. The wide range of languages in *Between* emerges from the circumstances in which the interpreter finds herself during her incessant travelling, such as for instance small travel-talks,

- Au revoir, madame bon voyage, drum bun.
- Mulțumesc padre, la revedere.
- Excusez-moi madame, si vous désirez apprendre, il faut dire părinte. Padre non, părinte. Et pour grande politesse, cuvioase părinte.
- Cuvioase? Cuvioase părinte? (B 480)

Ready-made phrases from travel phrase-books appear all through the text,

Bardzo piękne. Ah pani mówi po polsku? No, no, really, only a few phrases, from a phrase-book. Nie, ale bardzo dobrze! What does that mean? Very well, very good. (B 539)

Different languages originate also from the interpreter’s various attempts to communicate her needs,

- [...] nero metalico?
- Madame?
- Eau minérale.
- Ah, neró metálico! Nai. He shakes his head from side to side and exit. (B 534).

Again, the variety of languages springs from the various placards to be found in hotels and congress-buildings or from the warning notices to be heard on planes, or else it flows from shops’ sign-boards,

Eintritt, Sortie, Salita, Ausgang, Entrée, Fumatul oprit. No Smoking beyond this Point Kindly fasten your safety-belts [...] Push Tirez Ziehen Pchnąć. (B 555)

the left lane empty of traffic between the closed shops called MĂRUNȚIȘURI, LACTO VEGETARIAN, ALIMENTE, TUTUNGERIE. (B 404)

ELÖNYÖS! KÉNYELMES! BIZTONSÁGOS! (B 445)

The use of different languages in *Between* shows Pound’s influence on Brooke-Rose, which I have already considered in the first chapter. What Brooke-Rose derives from Pound is his use of different language to express different concepts, his idea that “It can’t be all in one language” (Brooke-Rose 1991 126). Since each language has a peculiar “identity” of its own, one specific language can be more apt than another to convey particular connotations of meaning. Pound’s use of many different languages in *The Cantos* – each employed at the service of diverse concepts or fields of knowledge – finds in Brooke-Rose an exemplary adept. In *The Cantos*,

for instance, French and Provençal are often used to tackle the themes of love and beauty, Italian is employed to express philosophic concepts, while political and social ideas are articulated in Chinese (Cf. Brooke-Rose 1991 126). Likewise, in *Between*, different languages are employed to talk about dissimilar experiences and fields of knowledge. French is mostly employed as the language of love and affection. It is the language of the interpreter's childhood, the one she uses to communicate with her mother. The latter, nevertheless, switches to English in a peculiar circumstance and with a different attitude, i.e. when she greets her daughter who is leaving for Germany and urges her not to talk to strangers,

maintenant que tu as quinze ans, I've packed all your prettiest dresses into a big trunk, and your German grammar [...] Your train leaves tomorrow at eight [...] don't talk to any strange men, or in fact to anyone at all tu entends? (B 524)

French, and in particular Provençal, are utilized by Bertrand to write love letters to the interpreter, whereas a philosophic concept such as "l'autentico dramma dell'agnosticismo" (B 441) is recurrently expressed in Italian, Rome being the place of abode of the Catholic Church, for which agnosticism is a "dramma".

Another kind of linguistic mixture to be found in *Between* is that of different *layers* of language: throughout the novel we find a wide range of technical discourses and jargons, linked to the different specialized fields of knowledge which are encountered during the various conferences, such as linguistics, anthropology, history, sociology and genetics. Problems such as the disarmament, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the demilitarisation of Germany or the significance of literature in contemporary society are discussed. Each field of knowledge involves a specialist jargon which the translator has to learn in advance in order to fulfil her task. "Do you find the technical jargon hard to follow? [...] archaeology, medicine, irrigation, economic-aid for the underdeveloped areas and so forth. Goodness, do you work it up in advance?" (B 468) asks a professor to the interpreter. Specific language uses deriving from conferences on "Structures of power" (B 509-10), malnutrition in Europe (B 511), famine in the developing countries (B 570), a medical congress on the molecules of memory (B 517-9), an academic seminar on the relationship between "La Littérature et la Sémantique" (B 478), and many other meetings and conventions, are presented to the reader. To make an example we could cite a passage from a convention on the problem of malnutrition in Europe,

E allora the languages fraternise in Geneva where malnutrition occurs in Europe on a far larger scale that anyone has realised owing to the widespread devitalising of foods due to mass-processing, chemical fertilisers, sprays and additives as well as ignorance of diet with 48% having an average intake of nutrients well below the minimum level, itself varying from 30 mg. of vitamins daily recommended by the British Medical Association in England to 70 mg. recommended by the American Medical Association and 200 mg. by the Russian. (B 511)

We have already observed how, in *Out* and *Such*, the use of a specific jargon bears a great poetical power and becomes one of Brooke-Rose's most outstanding experimental features. *Between* further enhances the mix of languages as it also presents different *systems* of language, such as for instance the sign languages to be found at airports, in hotels and at congresses, or the street code. For instance, the word "toilet" in a foreign language is followed by the description of its international symbol,

Sometimes German comes first then English then French with the language of the country Rumanian Russian Greek always first however such as Toaleta unless TOAΛETHA or even TOYAΛETTA with care not to enter Bărbați when the door bears no skirted figurine of high-heeled shoe. (B 506)

The reader who does not speak the language in question can, thanks to the description of the sign, distinguish between the ladies' and the gentlemen's toilets. In *Between*, the use of different languages and of "visual" systems of language function in the same way as the ideograms in Pound's poetry. They establish a sudden, visual relationship between signifier and signified, the sign on the page and its related meaning. They create a language "made up of objects on the page" in a way which is different from the way alphabetical languages work. Visual symbols and unknown languages focus the readers' attention on the external shape of the signifier, draw their interest to the material form of language: "the physical signifier is made more physical, the signified less important" (Friedman and Fuchs 84). This is, for instance, what happens when we find on the page such a description of a lift,

Emerging from the Avernus made easy with escalators. They also go down. Saying ΠΑΡΑΚΑΛΩ ANAMENETE, the button lighting up when pressed to call the lift, inside which incomprehensibly below 4 3 2 1 come blank white buttons with ΊΣΟΤΕΙΟΝ and ΣΤΟΝ and ΚΙΝΔΥΝΟΣ in red meaning perhaps alarm? (B 446-7)

The reader, unable to decipher the Cyrillic alphabet, directs his/her attention to the signifier itself, to its shape. The relationship between signifier and signified was at the centre of a vigorous critical debate. The Swiss linguist de Saussure had already seen how the linguistic sign is arbitrary and differential. It is arbitrary because the relation between signifier and signified is the result of a convention. It is differential

because the way we approach and understand a signifier does not depend on a “primary” relationship which exists between the two parts of the sign, but rather on the system on differences on which language is based. Meaning is thus the product of the phonic and graphological difference which distinguishes each sign from the others, and it is based on convention. Derrida takes up de Saussure’s notion of the linguistic sign and brings it forward, adding to the phonetic differentiation of de Saussure the notion of *différance*. The linguistic system, for Derrida, is caught up in the chain of signifying references that produce an infinite deferral and referral of meaning.

While Derrida sees that the concept of a one-way relationship between signifier and signified is an illusion generated by the metaphysical notion of “self-presence of the subject” (Derrida 1976 12), Barthes posits the play with the external shape of the signifier as the essential strategy enacted by the Text of bliss in order to continuously dismantle and reconstruct meaning. The Text of pleasure *suspends* meaning, because it suspends the signified value, as opposed to “an acute appreciation of the extravagance of the signifier”. The pleasure of the text, for Barthes, becomes “value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier” (Barthes 1975 65). The written word on the page is valued for its extravagant form and its possibility of multiple connotations of meaning, away from the idea of its reference to one single and permanent signified.

Stressing the role of the signifier *in* and *for* itself, *Between* playfully enters into this debate, while strengthening the traveller’s sense of disorientation and producing the same feeling in the reader. Hayman and Cohen explain how the initial tension in the reader’s mind, determined by the mixture of languages, is eventually dealt and resolved through laughter, thus following the *modus operandi* of humour, which is “based on a tension which is created in the mind [and] must be economically dealt with through laughter” (Hayman and Cohen 9). Brooke-Rose’s text achieves humour by means of its innumerable linguistic jokes, which are inextricably linked to the question of translation. In *Between*, humour is broadly based on connotations of meaning which “come off” in a language but would not in another. The functioning of one of these wordplays is explained by the interpreter herself, “Calorifère, as my mother used to say. She liked terrible puns [...] elle disait: Qu’alor y faire?” (B 551).

Here the phrase “qu’alor y faire” (what are we going to do?) becomes “calorifère” (central heating) if pronounced fast. Another of the many puns we find in *Between* is that of the protagonist perceiving, as a child, the word “Beaujolais” as “belle Jolaise” (B 523). Specific linguistic jokes such as these can clearly be made only in one language, as their connotation of meaning would change if transposed into another language.

The interpreter possesses a *constantly ironical approach to language*. For instance, when she reads a toilet notice saying “Bitte kein Handtuch benutzen”, she mockingly asks “Ever at all?” (B 410). Again, she humours on language when she observes “a Dutch dog barking in Dutch” (B 411), or else she plays with the transcription of an American accent: “Mineral warrer? Do you mean nachral warrer? [...] you can have sora-warrer. On the rahks” (B 411). Another kind of linguistic joke to be found in *Between* is the mixing up of advertising language to describe everyday situations, eventually with the aim of bantering on the fundamentally dramatic nature of some life’s experiences. For instance, in recalling the interrogations the interpreter and Siegfried were submitted to by the allied forces after the end of the war in order to get a certificate attesting their non-involvement with the Nazis – the so-called “denazification screening” (B 486) – Siegfried humorously labels the official document “Persil-Schein certificate denazifying us whiter than white” (B 473). The humour here results from the relation established between Siegfried’s phrase and the advertisement cliché for a famous cleaning powder, Persil. Interestingly, the pun works on a double level: on the one hand, they must obtain a “Persil certificate” which shows their “cleanliness” and non-commitment to Nazism, on the other hand, the German term “Schein” (Certificate) is pronounced as the English verb “shine”, therefore playing further on the idea of cleanliness.

The name of another well-known industrial cleaning product, “OMO”, is wittingly used by the protagonist as a reply (actual or imagined) to a shop assistant’s question “Madame désire?” (B 433). Even though “OMO” is the label of the washing powder, the interpreter’s answer humorously seems to imply her desire for a man. Linguistic puns address both the debate around the two parts of the linguistic sign and the dichotomy speech/writing, therefore recalling Derrida’s notion of writing and

différance, which we will extensively consider when analysing *Thru*. Moreover, the specific reference to OMO and Persil in *Between* strongly recalls Barthes' analysis of the language of advertisement. In *Mythologies*, in fact, he refers to both cleaning powders (Cf. "Soap-powders and Detergents", Barthes 1973 36-8).

Brooke-Rose's attitude towards language is as towards a material which can be funny at every moment and everywhere: in advertising, during congresses, or in private life, bearing the possibility of being played upon, hence the highly creative and entertaining linguistic humour of the novel. In *Between*, languages mingle, "fraternise behind their own façades finding each other exquisite" (B 449), sliding in the same sentence from one to another and from one technical jargon to the other. Like refrains, throughout the novel we find sentences repeated with slight variations referring to the amalgam of languages, such as,

As if languages loved each other behind their own façades, despite alles was man denkt darüber davon dazu. As if words fraternised silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication, inside the bombed out hallowed structures and the rigid steel glass modern edifices of the brain. Du, do you love me? (B 447)

Such sentences remind us of the Surrealist ideal of poetry made up of words making love, thus revealing the strong influence of Pound's poetry on Brooke-Rose. They also recall the "happy Babel" theorised by Barthes, for whom "The confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages" (Barthes 1975 3-4). In contrast to the Babel of the Old Testament, which was negatively connoted (being the insignia of the creator's rage against humanity's sins), for Barthes the coexistence of languages in a modern text is no longer a negative feature. In the very first page of *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes encourages the reader to "Imagine someone [...] who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality" (Barthes 1975 3). It is by means of the confusion of tongues that the subject gains bliss: "the pleasure is a sanctioned Babel" (Barthes 1975 4).

Brooke-Rose exhibits an absolute mastery over the complexity of languages in *Between*. The very multiplicity of discourses and the "state of verbal anarchy, the condition under which languages 'fraternize'" (Birch 73), become the novel's vital attribute. *Between* explicitly refers to "the Tower of Babel" (B 511) and enacts the fraternization and fornication of languages throughout itself, as epitomized by such sentences as,

E allora the languages fraternise in a frenzy of fornication by airmail par avion via aerea Luftpost ΑΕΡΟΠΟΡΙΚΩΣ Uçak [...] despite the Acqua Minerale battericamente pura Apă de Masă ΣΑΡΙΖΑ ΑΡΙΣΤΟΝ etc or SARIZA Eau de Table naturelle-curative [...] Gerolsteiner Sprudel natürliches Mineralwasser. (B 542)

If *The Pleasure of the Text* was originally published in 1973, i.e. five years after the appearance of *Between*, it is clear how Barthes' main ideas had already been endorsed by the critic-novelist Brooke-Rose, achieving their own climax and ratification within the proper practice of a text. In *Between*, many are the hints at the bruise of the language Barthes talks about, such as when we read about the members of the congress who "burble" (B 403), or about the "hum of voices [...] murmur of the talking" (B 427). Barthes also theorises the presence, in a text of bliss, of the seam between the two "edges" of language, the conformist and the subversive ones. The two languages must coexist and the seam between them must be made manifest in the pure materiality of language, in its lexicon, its syntax, its metrics. Using language in this way, a text would dismantle

ideological structures, intellectual solidarities, the propriety of idioms, and even the sacred armature of syntax (subject/predicate): the text no longer has the sentence for its model; often it is a powerful gush of words, a ribbon of infra-language. Yet [...] The dismantling of language is intersected by political assertion, is *edged* by the age-old culture of the signifier. (Barthes 1975 7-8)

As we have seen, *Between's* syntax is free-ranging, often literally constituting a powerful "gush of words" where language continuously dismantles and reconstructs itself, embodying Barthes' idea of a "paradise of words [...] continuous jubilation, the moment when by its very excess verbal pleasure chokes and reels into bliss" (Barthes 1975 8). In a text of bliss, "narrativity is dismantled yet the story is still readable" (Barthes 1975 9), and this is exactly what happens in *Between*: notwithstanding the powerful irruption of words on the page, the text does not *succumb* to it, on the contrary it is constructed by means of it, by what constitutes its very "pleasure of performance" (Barthes 1975 9). The reader of *Between* is meant to enjoy its combination of languages, enacting an "aristocratic" reading, experiencing the bliss of the text "in the volume of the languages, in the uttering, not in the sequence of utterances" (Barthes 1975 13). It is in the interstices between languages that the reader has to find their pleasure. The text of pleasure is not "linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (Barthes 1975 14), but it is rather a "text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions [...]"

brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 1975 14). In *Between*, it is language which speaks, pure and free-flowing, freed from the notion of author as source of meaning of the text. The text becomes the central object of itself. As Barthes explains, what is required in modern literature is,

the relativization of the relations of writer, reader and observer (critic) [...] against the traditional notion of the *work* [...] there is now the requirement of a new object, obtained by the sliding or overturning of former categories. That object is the *Text*. (Barthes 1977 156)

For Barthes, far from being an object that “can be computed” (Barthes 1977 156), the text is to be considered as a process, “*experienced only in an activity of production* [...] What constitutes the Text is [...] its subversive force in respect of the old classifications [...] the Text is that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc)” (Barthes 1977 157), “the text is multilingual” (Barthes 1974 120), and if the work “closes on a signified”, the “Text can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign” (Barthes 1977 158). The text is constituted by “the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (Barthes 1974 5). “To interpret a text is not to give it a [...] meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it [...] In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds” (Barthes 1974 5). It is therefore impossible to give an answer to the famous question “Who is speaking?” (Barthes 1974 41), an answer which would imply an absolute origin of the text, since the text is construed by the reader’s interpretation. The text does not deny meaning, rather it *suspends* it, “giving meaning its last closure: suspension” (Barthes 1974 217). Barthes’ point is crucial to our interpretation of *Between*: the very title of the novel indicates this state of suspension *in between* any fixed notion of meaning.

The state of suspension of meaning is crucially achieved also by the major narrative constraint Brooke-Rose adopts in *Between*, the lack of the verb *to be*. By omitting such a “stable” verb, the author achieves peculiar effects, both on the stylistic and on the mimetic levels. On the stylistic level, the avoidance of such a verb means that a different solution is offered to the reader every time that verb would have been automatically inserted. The new linguistic solution necessarily results more dynamic, active, and often metaphorical. The active substitutes of the verb *to be* become thus a way for the author to elude the obvious, the linguistic

cliché, to avoid the expected use of language. As regards the mimetic implication of this specific constraint, the omission of the verb *to be* links with the theme of constant movement, rendering the idea that the protagonist is never existing “here” in time and place, but always *in between*. The lipogram is thus inextricably linked to the protagonist’s existential status and entails important implications in terms of identity as related to the linguistic, philosophical, psychological and literary theories of the time. Constantly travelling and translating, the interpreter lacks any fixed identity. Although she exists as *in between*, always on the move, her condition is not to be read as a “search for identity”, but rather as an altogether lack or, as Brooke-Rose asserts, “loss of identity” (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 108). Constantly travelling, she has no set cultural and existential roots. She does not want or need an identity, as the very concept of identity is an illusion, identity, as traditionally conceived, does not exist. As Brooke-Rose reinstates, “Neither she nor others have one [identity]: we none of us have. Each of us is many; identity is wholly constructed and deconstructed by our world” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 44). The fact that all the interpreter’s thoughts, perceptions and memories are presented unreflexively, that she never says *I* except in dialogue, strongly contributes to give the idea of the interpreter’s existential condition, of her lack of identity. By depicting her character as experiencing this fundamental void, *Between* both originally inserts itself in the poststructuralist debate over fixed notions of truth – and therefore of identity as presence, truth and meaning – and addresses the psychoanalytic notion of subject.

In 1967, Derrida’s three hinge works appeared simultaneously, addressing what he calls the metaphysics of presence as responsible for the organization of Western thought by means of binary oppositions, where one, positive term is always privileged over the other, negative one. What Derrida deconstructs is the phenomenological notion of an essential truth linked to the idea of a centered epistemological subject which can achieve a pure, transcendental and immanent knowledge of things and their meaning. The notion of fixed meaning is subverted as the concept of truth is shown to be an illusion which is “the history of truth” (Derrida 1976 20). Derrida’s philosophical apparatus avails itself of Lacan’s notion of split subject, which is constituted with the child’s entrance into the Symbolic Order, the order of the father, law and language. This radical and insoluble split is produced by

means of language, which comes from outside the child. Language does not arise from within the individual, “it is always out there in the world outside, lying in wait for the neonate. Language always ‘belongs’ to another person” (Mitchell and Rose 5). If the subject is created by means of language and within language, which comes from outside the individual, it follows that the subject is created within a radical split. If the subject bears a gap between conscious and unconscious, Derrida concludes that meaning is never apparent, but lies in the gap, in the interstitial zone between the said and the non-said, the literal and the metaphorical, the evident and the hidden. Meaning does not depend on objective identity, but rather on interpretation.

The interpreter’s living *in between* is depicted as a basic condition of her existence. She is made to experience a sense of *betweenness* in each field of her life, on each level of her self. She vacillates, hesitates between different possible “ways of existing”. The perceiving consciousness of *Between* is presented as a self-divided, a fragmented self. She is a *split* subject in every respect of life’s experiences, as she acknowledges that “All ideas have equality before God” (B 426) and chooses to find her “unity” in a complete suspension of commitment to any notion of fixed idea.

First of all it can be asserted that she is split between languages: as an interpreter, she is aware of the fact that *translation always implies a process of interpretation*: when translating from one language into another, one has to carry out a complex operation of interpretation of meaning. Translation becomes, in Del Sapio Garbero’s words, “un’esperienza critica della soggettività” (Del Sapio Garbero 1990 183), a critical experience of subjectivity. Brooke-Rose’s idea that different languages entail dissimilar ways of looking at reality and “understanding” (interpreting) it is evident as the text continuously emphasises diverse linguistic structures and focuses on the different perceptual effects they generate. For instance we read that “Wenn man thinks AUF Deutsch, wann man in Deutschland lives”, then “acquires alles a broken up quality” because of “the gestures and the actions all postponed while first die Dinge und die Personen kommen” (B 447). Not only does the syntax of a language build up our representation of the world but even the very sounds of the words we utter do so: “Bitte Pflanzen oder Pflanzenteiler zu deklarieren” (B 565) produces a different “mental impression” from its English equivalent, “Please declare if you have plants or parts of plants” (B 401).

Brooke-Rose is deeply interested in the idea of translation. In one of her critical essays about the translation of Pound's *Cantos* into other languages, she analyses the difficulty of transposing one language's syntax into another. Far from automatically transferring meaning from one language into another, translation requires in each and every case particular solutions linked to the specific structures of the languages in question (Cf. Brooke-Rose 1991 125-8). Another major difficulty in translating, continues Brooke-Rose, derives from the fact that most of the times words cannot be rendered by a "perfect" equivalent in another language. Translation always and inescapably acquires slightly different connotations (Cf. Brooke-Rose 1991 129). The subtending idea of Brooke-Rose's linguistic practice is that language *shapes* reality, and that translation always entails a process of interpretation, in that the relationship between signifier and signified is never straightforward. The very concept of translation is dangerous in that it presupposes the presence of a transcendental signifier with a fixed meaning that can be easily transposed into another language.

Derrida's deconstructionist theory extensively considers the question of translation, of the transposition of meaning from one language to another. The problem of what *transpires* from translation is addressed by Derrida in relation to the terms "presence" (Cf. Derrida 1982a 33) and "representation" (Cf. Derrida 1982b 302) as connected to Heidegger's philosophy. His analyses are the more significant as he shows that the problem of translation starts from the very basic notions of the metaphysics of presence. The idea that there is a "semantic kernel" of the term which can be translated unproblematically from one language into another is a metaphysical assumption, implying the existence of a transcendental signifier. In reality, every signifier is caught in "the play of signifying references that constitute language" (Derrida 1976 7). Signification always refers to other signs, no sign refers only to itself. Meaning is located in multiplicity and caught in a process of infinite deferral, of never arriving at meaning itself. Once we realise that there exists no transcendental signifier, the idea of the infinite play with language arises, away from any notion of fixed meaning. In order "To think play radically [...] the question of the meaning of being, the being of the entity and of the transcendental origin of the world [...] must be patiently and rigorously worked through" (Derrida 1976 50).

The metaphysics of presence – originated from the idea of logos as related to self-presence of the being and to a reality based on eternal truths which language can express – must be subverted in order to show that in the place between the opposite terms of its binary oppositions arise the trace or arche-trace, constituted by the movement which produces *différance*, meaning as the difference out of the opposition between the elements: “*The trace is [...] the absolute origin of the sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of the sense in general. The trace is the différence which opens appearance [...] and signification*” (Derrida 1976 65).

The daily working with different languages by the novel’s protagonist specifically determines her state of “betweenness” as described above. As an interpreter, she comes to realise that language is deeply related to (if not determinant of) one’s individual perception of the world, and indeed what she regards as being the “reality” around her depends mostly on the language of the country she is in,

buenos días, Morgen or Kalimera who knows, it all depends where the sleeping has occurred out of what dream shaken up with non merci nein danke no thank you. (B 396)

She does not believe in a clear-cut correspondence between signifier and signified. A “pure” language does not seem to exist, a language which could be able to establish a sudden and “primary” relationship between the two parts of a sign. The language we make use of is a human construct and, as such, it is imperfect, unable to explain a concept or a thing *out* of the whole system. As is stated in the text,

if you look up the word happiness in the dictionary you will find that the apparent definition contains words which themselves need defining and so on ad infinitum which makes one very merry. Il n’y a jamais de sens propre au dictionnaire. (B 567)

The interpreter has no faith in society’s capability for communication. The idea of language as ensuring a “real” understanding between people is presented as an illusion. Le “problème de la communication” (B 409) is variously addressed throughout the novel and despite the global communication system, the protagonist feels that “words prevent any true EXCHANGE” (B 399) and that “no communication [...] ever occurs” (B 421). The only exception to this, seems to be represented by “the code de la route” (B 567). In fact, when the interpreter buys a “small Renault” (B 566) and sets on a trip by car, she appreciates the fact that the street-code is immediately understood by everyone, being thus language where

signifier and signified amazingly coincide and which produces a direct “understanding” between people. If you want to let someone cross the street, you just need to “wave [...] across with a courteous gesture” (B 567), or else if you get angry with someone, you can easily “shake the fist in a smooth swift silent language understood by everyone” (B 567). However, at times the text seems to ironically imply that, even in the case of the street-code, signifying system and reality often do not coincide, such as when the interpreter is travelling on a bus which overtakes a car despite the forbidding sign (B 404), or when a taxi-driver “drives the hired car regardless of white hands about to signal other cars across” (B 430). At any rate, while driving, the interpreter feels as if in a protected area of language, where there is no physical contact with other people, no need to speak to them face to face, and where the danger of being misunderstood is much lower than in everyday spoken intercourse. In the “freedom of the road”, she feels as if well “protected in a glass and metal box so that no-one can get at you” (B 567).

Disillusioned about the possibility of communication and understanding among people, the interpreter plays with the linguistic system and with her very disbelief, creating a playful “Mish-Mash of tender fornication” (B 447) out of her multilingual experience. In this connection, the sentence “Man denkt in Deutsch wann man in Deutschland lebt” (B 447) can be seen as readdressing Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, but also playing with it, since it goes on, “Und since man spricht sehr little Deutsch [...] man denkt in eine kind of erronish Deutsch das springt zu life feel besser than echt Deutsch” (B 447). The mixture of idioms and the wordplays are thus a way of renewing language itself, of making it being born again. In this way, Brooke-Rose seems not only to address the debate on language, but also and most importantly to offer a positive, playful solution to its problems. Playing with language becomes a way of going beyond that debate, for languages love each other “behind their own façades, despite alles was man denkt darüber davon dazu”(B 447).

Another major split in the interpreter is that between body and mind. Although her body is constantly compelled to travel in “simultaneous interpretation” (B 408), it participates in her job only passively. While working, the interpreter is portrayed as a kind of computerised transmitter, a *quasi* non-human being: “the eyes closed to watch the words” (B 482) which flow “into the ear through the earphones in French

and down at once out of the mouth into the mouthpiece in simultaneous German” (B 399). The interpreter’s task is thus presented as a mechanical brain-work, whereas her body is the mere vehicle of such a work. Her brain is the place where the conversion of one language into another automatically occurs, like a computer processor, and her body is the empty tool of such an operation, a “computer-case”. Her mouth, irremediably attached to the “mouthpiece”, seems to be an instrument itself rather than a human organ. There seems to exist no more than a mechanical connection between body and mind. Everything happens in the brain, whereas the body is just passively submitted to the job. The body is indeed almost seen as being submitted to prostitution, used merely as a tool for earning one’s own living, “one does one’s job, to the best of one’s ability, simply as an instrument” (B 457). While working, the character’s body is described as being “in a suspension of ideas transmitted from one microphone to another at a speed of five centuries per minute because the things understood slip away together with the need to understand” (B 470). Brooke-Rose affirms, “if you like, the body is always there [...] but it’s all much more happening in the brain, ‘the distant brain way up...’ [...] when you translate almost mechanically [...] it is the brain at work whereas the body is practically at rest” (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 99).

The same split body/mind is experienced in her private life: her body wakes up in different countries and her mind does not know at first what country she is in. The novel recurrently focuses on bottles of water variously labelled in different languages, as she usually realises in which country she has spent the night only by reading the label of the bottle on her hotel bedside table,

The light pours through the slatted shutters [...] San Pellegrino, Acqua litinica alcalina antiurica anticatarrale, Battericamente pura (B 424);

ΜΥΗΡΑΛΛΗ ΒΟΔΑ (B 441);

The bottle of Eau du Kiém stands on the dressing table (B 463);

Apă Minerală. (B 480)

When her room telephone rings, she answers according to the language she promptly checks on the label of the water bottle: “The telephone rings allo? Er, dígame? The bottle on the bedside table says Agua Mineral” (B 399).

Not only does the interpreter experience a split between body and mind, but also her mind is split in itself, or better *suspended* between ideas. Although she is constantly travelling between frontiers, languages, conferences and consequently

translating other people's ideas and theories, she merely transmits them and never treasures any of her own: "ideas? We merely translate other people's ideas [...] simul-ta-né-ment. No one requires us to have any of our own. We live between ideas, nicht wahr [...]" (B 413). Incessantly moving between ideas, she has realised that "all truths get institutionalised sooner or later and die" (B 453), and therefore that "nothing deserves a flow of rash enthusiasm" (B 426). The circumstances of her past life have crucially contributed to this peculiar attitude of hers, as she has come to acknowledge that every idea can be true or false according to the point of view being adopted. Still young, she is made to observe and experience last century's main catastrophic event, World War II, from both of the opposite sides. At school in France she is taught that "l'Allemagne a renouvelé ses folles ambitions" (B 522), while in Germany she is told that "das deutsche Volk no longer has enough Lebensraum" (B 521). She observes on the one hand "pride of conquest über alles", and on the other "longing for the end" (B 488), "the old wooden houses" burning "like ideas" (B 488). On the basis of this experience she has become aware of the fact that "the history of devastation" can be reconstructed "from the enemy point of view" (B 487), that the enemy point of view itself depends on which side you find yourself on, and that one might be on one side or the other not necessarily because of one's own strong political and social beliefs. Joining "the Bund Deutscher Mädel at fifteen" (B 489) after her French upbringing, she mispronounces "Heil Hitler" into "Hell Hitler" (B 489), and when asked by a German officer "do you feel so impersonal Fraulein about the Vaterland?", she replies (or imagines replying), "But where have all the fathers gone?" (B 490). Later on in her thoughts she insists: "das Vaterland die Heimat mother-country patrie according to the point of view" (B 527). Our interpreter is ironically described as a woman of "uncertain loyalties" (B 445). Different nations are obsessively present in her life and if there are "too many mother countries and fatherlands" (Bertacco 93), it is only for her to dismiss each national stereotype as an empty surface label, "The Gairmans they applause their speakers. The English they applause their speakers. The French say alone the French make intellectual contribution" (B 421), or as generalizing assertions, "But good Germans exist" (B 525). Used to the "presentation of opposite viewpoints on every aspect of an instant world" (B 498), she has realised that each side, each nation has its own

history. In contrast to a much younger colleague who “chatters happily [...] belonging apparently to a different species altogether undamaged unconcerned [...] unretarded by wars national prejudices bilingualism” (B 531-2), the events of the interpreter’s life have irremediably led her to mistrust any fixed belief. Perhaps sometimes she would like to “commit to one single idea”, to host ideals of her own, but she irremediably finds herself in a “suspension of judgment” (B 559). When she comes back to work after an unspecified period, she is compared to her ex-colleagues who have now married: “Most of your old friends have left you know madame for higher things such as the masculine unmarked [...] ambition change love desire marriage” (B 438).

Another crucial cut in the interpreter’s life is produced by her lost belief in religious faith. Brought up as a Catholic, the Church has “more than anyone” (B 514) undermined her faith. The Catholic Church is described as an institution which possesses a pompous and sumptuous appearance, whereas the real faith of its believers does not correspond to such an inflated ostentation of magnificence: “the cross on the curlicued façade so much taller than the small church behind it” (B 483). After her divorce, she asks for the annulment of her marriage by the canon law and she goes through a legal suit which costs her a great waste of effort, time and money. Indeed, she has to submit herself to long-lasting and minute interrogations, since “The Holy Mother Church takes each case very seriously and leaves no stone unturned to find out the truth in the eyes of God” (B 459). Such inquisitions judge her personal choices, “So you decided in advance [...] to divorce if it didn’t work, thus annulling the contract in the eyes of God?” (B 458), and rudely intrude upon her marriage intimacy, such as when the priest asks her about the contraceptive methods used by the couple, the answer made difficult by the necessary translation into Italian,

[...] what methods did you use?

- Comment? Ah. Hé bien mon père, d’abord une – je ne sais pas comment ça s’appelle en français.
- Dites en allemand mon enfant, ou en anglais.
- A sheath, at first, then a Dutch hat, er, cap.
- Non capisco.
- Vous voulez dire, madame, une capote anglaise?
- Non mon père. Je crois que capote anglaise veut dire ce que les anglais appellent French Letter.
- Una cosa di gomma ?
- Sì.
- E l’altra cosa, più tardi ?
- Je ne sais pas monsignor.

- Dessinez, s'il vous plaît. Ah si, si, la conosco. Va bene. Scusi, grazie tanto. (B 449)

In this dialogue, the peculiar linguistic humour of the novel is fully appreciable. A privacy-invading question is turned into a play with language, and becomes a way to mock the way different countries label the same object: the French call it "capote anglaise", and the English name it "French letter". The conversation, moreover, strongly renders the feeling of being lost in translation.

Notwithstanding such trivial inquiries and many other obstacles, the woman goes through the case for the annulment of her marriage. It will last seventeen years and pass through the Courts of Westminster, Augsburg and Rome, "all this for four years of marriage" (B 459). Siegfried repeatedly tries to convince her to give up the entire matter, and a proposal of marriage recurs several times in the course of the novel (probably it is Siegfried who proposes to her) but she invariably refuses to remarry,

- [...] So why don't you marry me after all these years?

- You know why.

- Oh that. The Vicariato di Roma. I can't think why you bother can you?

- No. not any longer. But after all these years as you say one might as well see it through. (B 431-2)

Interestingly, under other circumstances she will say that even if she no longer believes in the Church, she carries on the legal case as a "sort of blind protest at the lack of freedom to choose, for or against" (B 465). After three hearings, the arrival of the last verdict which finally proclaims the matrimony nullification as a "SENTENTIA DEFINITIVA" (B 570), is cast in a highly sarcastic light. "The Last Judgment" arrives together with "thirty printed pages of undoubted thoroughness" written in Latin, so as to criticise the backwardness of the Church and its superfluous scrupulousness for insignificant details which determine the "truth" of the matter. Indeed, the hints to the narrowness of the Church's posture are many and insistent throughout the novel. We are even presented with a "Congress of Gnostics" (B 462) during which we are told,

outside the Church no salvation which simply will not do and indeed the Church itself has now admitted its error in this respect as in so many others. History has proved them wrong again and again, even in religious matters they have quietly had to shift their ground many a time while yet proclaiming to guard the eternal verities against the morality of the age. [...] look at the vital mysteries they have lost, by euphemising and narrowing them into convenient dogmas which even lose their convenience as times pass. (B 462-3)

The protagonist is well aware of the mechanism by which the Church has changed its proclaimed "verities" in the course of history to try to be in line with the

changing society, yet not succeeding in its purposes. Moreover, even if such “truths” change as time passes, the institution keeps on defining them “eternal verities”.

Strictly related to the interpreter’s split between ideas is her split between love and freedom: Brooke-Rose’s character appears to be divided between the desire to have sexual intercourse, and *perhaps* to love someone, and her beloved “freedom of the air” (B 471). Her attitude towards love and sex is ambiguous. She sometimes seems to feel lonely and to desire a male company. The novel’s recurrent focus on the emptiness of beds can be viewed as a metaphor for the solitude she experiences, for “the double bed feels huge empty” (B 400) and “no body occupies the empty space in the large bed” (B 410). She occasionally fantasises about a love relationship: “for one day the man will come and bring you out of this or that zone with a tremendous force and the intensity of a love lost or never gained such as for instance one idea that actually means something in the light of that love” (B 402). At times, she even seems to *strive* for love: “Please do not throw into W.C. because one day the man will come and lift you out of your self-containment” (B 446). At the same time, however, we are clearly told that she has a deep-seated “terror of someone offering etwas anderes, not ordered” (B 414), and that she prefers being free: “freedom has its sudden attraction as the body floats in willing suspension of responsibility to anyone” (B 422). In this light, the terror she experiences at the idea of “someone offering etwas anderes, not ordered” could be interpreted as fear of someone offering love and commitment (which would imply responsibility), as opposed to occasional and free sexual intercourse. The novel’s persistent focus on hotel *single* rooms and beds being not so comfortable as double ones (Cf. B 433), could be therefore interpreted as her wish for a double bed to occupy alone: in a double bed she would benefit from more room for herself and her freedom, whereas the presence of a man would limit her space.

If the interpreter’s attitude towards love and sex is ambiguous, dubious is the assertiveness of the many negative statements which construct the narrative, such as “No one comes in offering anything not ordered” (B 410). The use of this peculiar type of negation is a very important aspect of the text, since it bears linguistic, stylistic as well as philosophical implications. In linguistic and stylistic terms, a dubiously assertive negation plays on the reader’s expectations: what, at first, seems

to be an absolute negation, is in reality a dubious assertion. Brooke-Rose explores the possible effects of unusual linguistic structures and plays with the reader's prospect, eluding the expected use of language. Even more interestingly, these dubious sentences could be also read as "negative affirmations", i.e. as double negations leading to an *inversion of meaning* and as such bearing peculiar philosophical implications. The act of negating twice in order to affirm/invert meaning can in fact be transposed to the ontological plane of the novel. A double negation leading to an inversion connotes the circular movement which subtends the whole text and which I will investigate later on in my analysis.

The centre of consciousness of *Between* is therefore split between the idea of a union and her disillusion due to the failure of her previous marriage: "for what? Just the need to belong and to obey? Look where that got us before" (B 465). She has gradually "Grow[n] away" (B 530) from each man she has encountered. Although she is no longer young – her "greying strand [...] needing that glint of a tint" (B 414), and her various lovers trying to convince her to "come into one world liebes, decide between loving and not loving, you have passed the age of adventure now, what thirty-four, forty-three?" (B 444-5), yet she remains as if suspended between ideas and ideals, thinking that "nothing, rien, niente deserves a flow of desire love loyalty ambition marriage" (B 499). Many times throughout the text it is said that "The new lord mayor has promised to take up the challenge in getting you to commit yourself to a single idea" (B 457). The figure of the "new lord mayor" could be interpreted as representing each new lover of hers; the reference to them as "lord mayor[s]" would therefore shed sarcastic light on the fact that men exhibit a patronizing attitude towards the interpreter. The latter however resists any persuasion and chooses her freedom each time again, getting "bitten again with the old Wanderlust" (B 458). She knows that any commitment to one idea would cost her much, that any kind of enthusiasm would lead her again to disillusion. Even though she seems to have sexual intercourse with occasional lovers, she looks at them and their enthusiasm from an estranged point of view. She is disenchanted about the "vital lie" which is love,

Most people need [...] to love and to this end will [...] persuade themselves that the vital lie contains sufficient simulation of desire to reintegrate him into totality [...] imagination so totally at odds with any real situation. (B 555)

The interpreter of *Between* is represented as living in a society where ideals, commitment and enthusiasm necessarily lead to disillusion: one eventually pays heavily for them. Revealingly, one of the most frequently repeated sentences throughout the novel is the question the Customs agents ask her,

Please declare if you have plants or parts of plants with you such as love loyalty lust intellect belief of any kind or even simple enthusiasm for which you must pay duty to the Customs and Excise until you come to a standstill. (B 414)

This question – which literally keeps haunting the interpreter – seems to be constituted in its first part by the real phrase asked to travellers at the Customs, and in its second part by the interpreter's own bitter ironical consideration about society. The very society which has made her lose any belief in its ideals and which is constantly trying to make her commit again, is at the same time reminding her that any other commitment would cost her too much: she will have to pay duty for them until she comes to a "standstill", i.e. until death. The "plants or parts of plants" inquired about by the Customs agents might be also interpreted as foetuses: the protagonist would be asked the same question so recurrently heard by childless women, a question which is directly stated when we read, "have you considered madame what the life entails between the enormous wings losing height [...] have you any children?" (B 438-9). On another occasion, she is warned: "you must hurry, the clay-like sea will liquefy at any moment now and you will need your zemvest" (B 533). However, she seems to continually postpone the decision of having a child: "l'altra cosa più tardi gets postponed by a magic wall of defence consisting of commissions congresses conferences" (B 542). When she finally obtains the annulment of her marriage, the cruel humour of the sentence "just in time for the menopause" (B 570) makes Judy Little assume that "the woman perhaps wanted a new marriage and even children" (Little 1995 73).

An additional fragmentation experienced by the interpreter's self derives from her living in today's changing society, a society which already points to globalization and the homogenisation of cultures. I agree with Bertacco when she observes that "*Between* offers a dystopian view of the world to come [...] Globalization as imagined by Brooke-Rose in 1968 is seen as destructive of the subject's uniqueness" (Bertacco 94). The situation in which the interpreter is made to exist is presented as a transitional period between the old order of things and a new world to come, as we

read in the novel: “We live in an age of transition between one social order and another and we must effectuate that transition or die” (B 462). The protagonist of *Between* lacks faith in the conventional values of a society where every aspect of civilization is less substantial in reality than the way it publicly appears. Like that of the Church, the “façade” of a house is said to be “much taller than the small imagination behind it” (B 417), the “tall façades” of buildings have “small spirits behind them” (B 477), and words, especially lovers’ ones, enact “a circular dance so much taller than the small love behind it” (B 544). The central consciousness of *Between* is made to exist in a society where problems are endlessly discussed, but no real action is undertaken to solve them, where everyone talks but does not listen to the others, like in a “dumb show” (B 561): “The world talks and compiles statistics and does nothing except build more satellites more missiles ad infinitum yes, nothing but despair” (B 483). The experts do nothing but talk and even their talking is made to appear wrong, as wrong is the exponential calculation about the multiplication of population presented at a congress,

Populations multiply almost by geometrical progression gnädige Frau, in simple terms two times two equals four, times two equal eight, times eight equals sixteen und so weiter ad infinitum. (B 483)

The correct sequence, presented elsewhere in the novel, should be “two times two equals four times two equals eight times two equals sixteen ad infinitum” (B 504). However, despite the wrong calculation, the end result of the multiplication is right. This could be interpreted as an ironical reference to the forecasts made by experts about the future of the world and to their specialized jargon. Moreover, the discourse presents a grammatical mistake. The verb “equal” in the third person singular should be in fact “equals”: throughout the text there is a great amount of grammatical mistakes which reinforce the interpreter’s sense of being lost amongst people who speak different languages and not always properly. In this particular case, the error seems to reinforce her disbelief in specialized languages which claim to tell the truth, but which indeed make mistakes. Moreover, the novel seems to imply that, whichever the statistics and the forecasts about the future society might be, people remain indifferent to them: “Between the cold statistics and the stark bare facts of hunger lies an immense period called indifference” (B 475). The central character of *Between* is made to be living in a world where a “curtain [...] divides the poorer from the richer” (B 474-5), “the ordinary from the better” (B 404), “the

starving from the affluent” (B 571), and where the power that controls society is unseen, just as in a plane a curtain divides the second from the first class (Cf. B 395). In a society which aims at achieving “the domestication of Chronos” (B 569), she prefers to live “anticlockwise” and wears no wristwatch. Interestingly, whereas at the beginning of the novel, Siegfried wears no wristwatch either, towards the end of the text, after he sets down in Holland, marries and has a child, he takes up the habit of wearing a watch and proposes to present the interpreter with one, but she refuses. Siegfried thus finally accepts the conventional society’s values (marrying, having a child, setting in one place and living “clockwise”), while the protagonist continues to live in her condition of betweenness. She continues existing as if *floating* between spaces and times, such as when she travels between continents and the sky darkens “at the speed of sight” (B 537). Sometimes she keeps on gazing at the sun for hours, “the sun remains ahead from four o’clock to midnight never setting as the plane chases it across the clay Atlantic” (B 411), or she sees the sun high in the sky while travelling on the plane, even if before takeoff it was darkening (Cf. B 404, 538).

The interpreter is represented as having been crucially influenced by such experiences as the Great War, her lost religious faith and the failure of her marriage. These occurrences have irremediably altered her attitude towards life. Remarkably, a parallel could be traced between her existential condition and what it is said during a “Medical Congress on the molecules of memory” (B 515). At the congress, one of the speakers maintains that peculiar circumstances in a person’s life could even act on the RNA code, eventually modifying its biological sequences and structure. In other words, “au niveau cérébral” (B 517) our reaction to life’s perceptive stimuli might be definitively affected by previous events. Later on the text hints at the fact that the protagonist’s approach towards life has been permanently altered by “the stimuli of environment, in other words, events” (B 571). Such a detail might corroborate the link between the theory expounded at the medical congress and the interpreter’s status. This concept interestingly relates to both Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory and Derrida’s notion of *present*.

Lacan saw that the decentred subject continually projects its past trauma into the future as the only means of recognising itself. The past can be recuperated only by means of its projection into the future, in a movement where the subject is never

in the present, but exists only in as much it continuously projects its past into the future. For Derrida, the so-called “present” is always already compromised by a trace, or a residue of a previous experience, that precludes us ever being in a self-contained “now” moment. The experience of the “now”, “present-to-itself”, of “coinciding with oneself” is impossible (Derrida 1973 68). The metaphysical notion of self-presence which accords primacy to the “now” of temporal immediacy is shown to be an illusion. Meaning is always in process, becoming, an infinite dissemination of meaning. The significance of the past can only be appreciated from the future, but the future is itself caught in an analogous process of change. The future that Derrida refers to is not a future that will become present, but the future that makes all presence possible and impossible at the same time. There can be no presence-to-self, no self-contained identity, because the nature of our temporal existence implies the inaccessibility of the present moment. In the light of these theories, we realise how *Between* reveals precisely this movement or connection between past and future, where the present is for ever eluded. The interpreter lives *in between*: on the one hand, her memories and previous experiences continuously return to affect her split subjectivity, on the other hand, she is constantly travelling, i.e. perennially projected into a future that never comes. She is therefore irremediably seized between past and future, she exists in this very temporal gap.

Having delineated the character’s peculiarities in terms of “loss” of identity, disbelief in ideas, and lack of faith in the values of society, it is essential to note how all this does *not* entail a negative attitude towards life: the interpreter chooses to *positively exploit* this state of things, precisely by *playing with her very sense of loss*. She goes on living as if suspended between ideas as this implies no fixed commitment to anyone and anything. She is in fact depicted as if relentlessly floating between opposite poles: between “doing and not doing” (B 395), “sleeping and not sleeping” (B 398), “the dawn and the non-existent night” (B 404), “loving and not loving” (B 420), “the zest of youth and the enlightenment of the old age” (B 444), “man and God, liberty and redemption” (B 452), “one social order and another” (B 462), “the dawn and the unrounding night” (B 474), “the cold statistics and the bare facts” (B 475), “existing as a woman and working as a man” (B 505), “belief and disbelief” (B 540), “total indifference and a mild desire to pick up the broken bits”

(B 553). In such a state of *suspension*, she exists only and inasmuch she finds herself *in between*, committing herself *neither to belief nor to disbelief*. Any choice between two extremes would mean positing herself *into* or *outside* of the social order, it would imply commitment: choosing belief or disbelief would amount to the same thing, any choice would *entrap* her, but she *is* free only *in between traps*.

The central consciousness of *Between* is an ambiguous figure, who “may stand [...] as one emblem of our ambiguous present, [...] our postmodernity [...] on the one hand, close to being submerged by the detritus of a civilisation whose broken-up quality she both registers and exemplifies [...] on the other hand, playing with that very sense of loss” (Suleiman 126-7). The question “what difference does it make?” (B 432, 456, 464) recurs in fact throughout the novel like a refrain. For the interpreter there is no difference between the two alternatives of a choice. Interestingly, Judy Little views this character as being,

in transit between her free floating postmodern condition and her residual commitment to a life that was not so “between.” [...] she moves towards a greater freedom from the ideologies that have cost her something. (Little 1995 72-3)

The interpreter frees herself from the loyalties of her past, and “from the oppressive, possessive quality that can accompany dedication to a single idea” (Little 1995 72). For Little, Brooke-Rose’s narrating instance is not a totally postmodern product: she is located between a commitment to some faith of a sort (she was previously committed to the idea of marriage) and postmodern disbelief. In this light, she could be viewed as embodying the passage between one order and another or – in my own view – as choosing to be neither in one world nor in another. She lives simultaneously in a disintegration and multiplication of meaning. She is capable and willing to see things in different ways at the same time. She wittingly chooses and enjoys the “betweenness” of her life. In this connection, Coleridge’s famous sentence “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge XIV 6), varied throughout the novel into “willing suspension of responsibility to anyone” (B 422), and “willing suspension of loyalty to anyone” (B 461, 462), acquires salient connotations. The protagonist has a “*loyal disloyalty* to any ‘one single idea’”, she is “loyal to her disloyalty”, “disloyal on principle” (Little 1995 73). However, I believe it important to specify that her attitude towards life does not precipitate her into inactivity: she is not static, on the contrary, she is actively playing. Once more I am in agreement with Judy Little as

she asserts the interpreter does not represent “a postmodern consciousness adrift in meaninglessness [...] she has fought hard for the costly meaninglessness, or betweenness of her life [...] she is willing to suspend” belief and disbelief in a “playful if disorienting freedom” (Little 1995 73-4). In other words, the “meaninglessness” of her status does not bear negative connotations. Her existential condition does not embrace meaninglessness as such, but rather concerns itself with the *disruption* of the illusion of stable meaning, of any notion of fixed meaning. She chooses her “playful if disorienting freedom” again and again throughout the novel till the end. Indeed, the novel begins and ends with the same image of the interpreter’s body floating between the enormous wings of the plane. She does not try to go out of the situation of suspension she lives in. She can exist *only* in the fragmentation of her “Is”. To support this view is Brooke-Rose’s comment on the interpreter’s fragmentation of identities: “she never brings them together and I don’t think she should [...] I don’t think that one has to unify all these ‘Is’” (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 108-9).

Etymologically, the word *between*, be-twēn, means “in the middle of two”, but as a combination of *be* and *two*, seems to connote the peculiar “doubling” of the character. Moreover, the term seems to reintegrate the verb *to be* into the novel, so as to say that, if the interpreter has no identity within the reality around her (she is never the subject of the verb to be), yet she finds her own identity in her *betweenness*. She can *be* only in between her very split. The novel’s central consciousness’s existential condition can be perfectly described by Barthes’ words: “the subject [of the text of bliss] is never anything but a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (Barthes 1975 20-21).

Brooke-Rose’s text addresses and subverts the ideological truths of our culture, showing how apparently opposite viewpoints amount to the same thing: ideology is an illusion. The use of specialist jargons in *Between* is significant in this connection, as they are used in relation to ideologies (each congress makes use of a specialized language, the Church speaks Latin). Specialized language is thus seen as supporting the specific ideology it is used for. This concept links once more to Barthes, who describes ideologies as fictions supported by their specialized jargons: “Ideological

systems are fictions [...] Every fiction is supported by a social jargon, a sociolect, with which it identifies” (Barthes 1975 27). For him, the subject must inhabit one of these jargons in order to keep “these spoken systems from disturbing or embarrassing [him/her]” (Barthes 1975 29). The text of bliss however tries to find another solution to the question of ideologies and their idioms: instead of inhabiting one of them, it overcomes the system, by putting itself outside of language as system, attacking the canonical structures of language and exploding the logic of the system,

by a gradual labor of extenuation. First, the text liquidates all metalanguage, whereby it is text: no voice (Science, Cause, Institution) is *behind* what it is saying. Next, the text destroys utterly, *to the point of contradiction*, its own discursive category [...] Lastly, the text can, if it wants, attack the canonical structures of language itself [...]: lexicon (exuberant neologisms, portmanteau words, transliterations), syntax (no more logical cell, no more sentence) [...] a new philosophic state of the language-substance; this extraordinary state [...] outside origin and outside communication, then becomes language, and not *a* language, whether disconnected, mimed, mocked. (Barthes 1975 30-31)

This is exactly the procedure *Between* follows: it attacks the fixed structures of language by means of its free-ranging syntax, its mix of languages, its wordplays on the supposed correspondence signifier/signified, thus blurring any systematised structure of communication, mocking the power ideology behind them, dismantling and overcoming their fixed notions of meaning and truth. “What is overcome, split, is the moral unity that society demands of every human product” (Barthes 1975 31), the same moral unity which everybody tries to “test” in the interpreter, who pulls herself away, safe from the alienation of ideology, from its dominant power-structure. She understands in fact that “The social struggle cannot be reduced to the struggle between two rival ideologies: it is the subversion of all ideology which is in question” (Barthes 1975 32-3). The text is paradoxical in that it goes “*behind* the limit of the *doxa*” (Barthes 1977 157-8),

The Text [...] practises the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier and the signifier must not be conceived of as ‘the first stage of meaning’, its material vestibule, but [...] as its *deferred action*. Similarly, the *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable [...] but to that of a *playing* [...] realized [...] according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations. (Barthes 1977 158)

The Text is *irreducibly* plural because of “the *plurality* of its weave of signifiers”. It is “not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing [...] an explosion, a dissemination” (Barthes 1977 159). If specialized jargon supports power ideology, it follows that one must learn its language to enter its system. The character of *Between* seems to free herself from ideological enslavement by learning a multiplicity of jargons at the same time, but inhabiting none of them. She is free to

enter and exit the systems of the jargons she speaks at her own pleasure. She is free from their needed obedience. She can get in and come out of different orders whenever she wants, she is in a privileged position and does not have to be subservient to one order, for if one has got more than one master, none of them will be absolute. In this way, she succeeds in freeing herself from their hold.

One of the means of ideological subversion which Barthes postulates and Brooke-Rose enacts in *Between* is repetition. The former says that while “all official institutions of language are repeating machines” (Barthes 1975 40), yet, a way of opposing the language of the institutions is repetition, for “to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified” (Barthes 1975 41). If the ideological stereotype is “the word repeated without any magic” (Barthes 1975 42), “The distrust of the stereotype [...] is a principle of absolute instability which respects nothing (no content, no choice)” (Barthes 1975 43). Furthermore, for Barthes, in order to subvert structure, language must start subverting its fixed “unit”, the sentence. The completed sentence “is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions” (Barthes 1975 49). In order to explode its hierarchy, the sentence must remain open, infinite, incomplete,

any completed utterance runs the risk of being ideological. In fact, it is the power of completion which defines sentence mastery and marks [...] the agents of the Sentence. [...] The pleasure of the sentence is to a high degree cultural. The artifact created by rhetors, grammarians, linguists, teachers, writers, parents – this artifact is mimicked in a more or less ludic manner; we are playing with an exceptional object, whose paradox has been articulated by linguists: immutably structured and yet infinitely renewable: something like chess. (Barthes 1975 50-51)

Like the language of *Between*, which has no fixed meaning, the interpreter refuses to accept any established notion of truth. She is unnamed, for to be named would imply accepting the logic of naming which subtends language and its structure of power. This choice on Brooke-Rose’s part bears multiple considerations, both related to the interpreter’s lack of identity and to her womanliness. In the first respect, we can recall what Barthes says about a character and its proper name. He sees that a character is made up of semes which traverse a proper name and settle upon it, giving the character a body, proper signifieds, a biographical time and space, a meaning and a purpose (Cf. Barthes 1974 67-8). Inversely, the character who has no name becomes a “figure”, “has no chronological or biographical standing” (Barthes 1974 68), refuses to be fixed meaning, signified. When we restore a proper

name to a discourse, says Barthes, we act “in accordance with the economic nature of the Name” (Barthes 1974 94-5). The text, as theorised by Barthes, undoes nomination, for the lack of the proper name challenges the “relationship between sign and sum” which is constituted when a name is given to the character. In Barthes’ view, the maintained lack of a name in a text engenders subversion, for it “creates a serious deflation of the realistic illusion”. In the modern novel, “What is obsolescent [...] what can no longer be written is the Proper Name” (Barthes 1974 95).

As for the implications the character’s lack of name entails in terms of her being a woman, we refer to the next chapter.

Chapter 3

A language made up of scraps: a negative travel against negation

Having analysed the several splits of *Between*'s central consciousness, and the way she chooses to find her existential status in her betweenness, in a suspension of choice in every fundamental respect of existence as conceived by our culture, I will now consider the most significant cut in the interpreter's existence, i.e. the one deriving not only from her being a woman and existing in a "masculine-dominated" (B 507) society, but also from her being a woman interpreter and working with a masculine language, a language which is made to serve the interests of that society.

The interpreter's womanliness is in fact no incidental detail. The already mentioned block experienced by Brooke-Rose during the first draft of the work derived mainly from the fact that its central character was not firstly conceived as a woman. As the author explains, since her previous novel's main character was a man, she had begun to write the novel instinctively depicting a male point of view. However, when the author resumed her work, she realised that turning the character into a woman would perfectly suit the role of the interpreter, for "simultaneous interpretation is a passive activity, that of translating the ideas of others but giving voice to none of one's own, and therefore a feminine experience" (Brooke-Rose 1991 7). This plays on the view that a masculine society has about women, "This idea that a translator merely transmits other people's ideas [...] is a sort of cliché about women. It's the view that a masculine world has and has had for many centuries about women" (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 99). Language is a male "prerogative": when a woman speaks, she speaks under men's conditioning. Like an interpreter, a woman is seen as "just interpreting the ideas of other people and never has any ideas of her own" (Tredell 32). Interestingly, as Brooke-Rose elucidates, even ancient female oracles were "taken over, very early, by male gods, that is to say reduced to priestesses of Zeus, Apollo, etc., speaking in their names" (Brooke-Rose 1991 241).

The interpreter of *Between* is aware of the fundamentally masculine nature of the society she lives and works in, a society which claims to give equal rights to women and men, but where in reality alone-standing women experience a very

difficult situation, for although they are apparently given the possibility to emancipate themselves, they still have to fight hard for their choices. We have moreover to consider that during the sixties, when the novel appeared, it was still not much tolerated that a woman could work as a man. Revealingly enough, the interpreter is said to be “existing as a woman and working as a man” (B 505).

The interpreter’s working with language is inextricably related to the condition of lack of identity and split she experiences. In an essay dedicated to Julia Kristeva, Barthes sustains that working with language means to put oneself in a position of immediate strangeness towards it (Cf. Barthes 1988 180). The interpreter of *Between* is in fact a stranger to language because of her work, but she is even more estranged from language as a woman, since – as Irigaray maintains – the *logos* is “phallogocentric” and the society we live in is “phallogocentric” rather than logocentric. To be a female interpreter thus means to be twice an interpreter: as a worker who is expected to decode messages from one language into another, and as a woman who, in everyday life, has to interpret a “masculine-dominated” world and language.

For Irigaray, women cannot place their identity within the boundaries of a language that submits them to its rules and reserves for them only marginal places. In this connection, throughout Brooke-Rose’s novel, there recurs an obsessive reference to the location of the bathroom door (on the plane, in hotel lobbies or rooms) which is almost always on the left, “in fondo a sinistra” (B 435), “immer geradeaus dann links” (B 445), “au fond à gauche” (B 467), as if to represent the marginal position of women in a masculine world, even within language and by means of language since, in a conventionally gendered linguistic practice, men’s toilet is to be found always on the “right right”, whereas women’s toilet is situated on the “wrong left”. In addition, The interpreter is unnamed and no personal pronoun refers to her, for she cannot be “represented” by means of a language subservient to masculine ideology. The interpreter’s womanliness is dissociated from the language she works with. Hence her working bodily posture, which exemplifies her self-closure: her eyes closed, her ankles crossed, her hands joined on her lap, and “the two thumbs pressing towards the body the fingers touching away from it forming a roof with a squat diamond space between”. Such a position “closes the circuit [...] so that you are self-contained [...] and no-one can get at you” (B 444). Her body thus refuses to

participate in a masculine pact of communication and closes in itself when forced to be its vehicle. Hers is a dismembered body: the airplane safety-belt almost becomes a chastity belt which imprisons it; the sheets of hotel beds are viewed as a *quasi sudarium* which envelops a wounded, or more likely dead body (dead because deprived of its own femininity in order to find a place in language). This subtraction is suggested by the several mentions to the linguistic marked/unmarked dichotomy, where the nature of the opposition between the grammatical genders is permeated with metaphorical overtones, implying that the feminine is always viewed as deriving from the masculine. As Brooke-Rose herself explains, “Lacan argues that totalization, or the construction of a whole, is always based on exclusions and is therefore always on the masculine side in his division *tout/pas tout* (whole/non whole), the *pas tout* being on the feminine side” (Brooke-Rose 1991 179). By means of language, society is structured on the opposition masculine/feminine and the latter is viewed only as the former’s own “appendix”. The masculine is posed as the basis of any social system, be it linguistic or sexual. Moreover, when a man tells the interpreter, “ich lieb’dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt” (B 416), the term “Gestalt”, which he uses to express his love to the woman, reinforces the allusion to Freud’s and Lacan’s theories, where the term expresses the lost unity of the subject which subtends its relationship with the other sex.

We have already discussed the interpreter’s lack of identity. Throughout the novel, the terms absence or Abwesenheit are recurrent. The “Abwesenheit” the interpreter is made to experience could be read as the absence of a man but also as the absence *from* her own gender, which she has to renounce owing to her working with a masculine language. However, the protagonist’s perception constantly focuses on images and shapes which suggest her femininity. Her womanliness is never directly stated in the novel, but only alluded to by means of a series of images such as a medal “between her breasts” (B 421), the hinting shape of “the rectangles of agriculture” (B 439, 447, 448) she observes from the plane, or the description of a razor-blade package or advertising card,

On the left of the broad yellow arrow that points down from corner to corner of the square card the razor-blade, printed in green, has a white narrow slit dented with short vertical bars and two small circles on either side of the diamond-shape in the centre. On the other side two pink lips slightly separated echo the white and dented slit in the green razor-blade. Pour le démaquillage et pour le rasoir. (B 506)

We are told that the square card is divided by a “yellow arrow diagonal from corner to corner”, and that a razor-blade is printed on one side of it, whereas “two pink lips slightly separated” are on the other. Small diamond shapes, bars and circles also appear on the card. It is evident that the razor-blade can be used by both men and women, but the image on the card clearly alludes to the masculine/feminine dyad, while the diagonal arrow which divides the square card summons up the bar which separates the opposite terms of the dyad. *Between*’s constant allusion to “feminine” shapes could represent the interpreter’s struggle to surpass the status of sexual indeterminacy in which she is cast by means of language. Her attention to such shapes would be therefore a way of letting her body remember its femininity. In addition, allusions to the interpreter’s auto-erotic practice are abundant in the novel, such as when she touches her body during the night,

With the left hand fingering the medal of St. Christopher between the breasts just when the brown stops and the white begins, touching a little brushstroke size over the skin soft still between the breasts and round under the right cupping it caressing it just a little on the nipple that swells under the fingers brushstroke size. (B 536)

By means of her auto-erotic practice and her attempts to remind her body of its femininity, the interpreter seems to gain a peculiar self-referentiality. She acquires for herself the masculine role and reaches a peculiar balance between the suffered absence from her sex and the chosen absence of the man. This interpretation is corroborated by sentences which allude to the *balance* between absence and presence she comes to reach. For instance, she is said to have achieved a “particular context of perfect proportion between presence and absence that signifies eine Abwesenheit die bedeutet” (B 570).

As I have already considered in the previous chapter, the interpreter wittingly exploits the situation she experiences in order to free herself from the grip of the society she lives in. As I will show, she enacts a similar strategy in relation to the language she is submitted to. By means of her highly original linguistic solutions, in fact, she succeeds in finding patterns capable of expressing her own identity.

It is extremely interesting to consider the interpreter’s linguistic solution in light of Irigaray’s theories on feminine identity and language. Such theories were beginning to acquire relevance during the sixties, yet all of Irigaray’s hinge-works were still to be published at the moment *Between* was released. My aim is not to pair *tout court Between* with Irigaray’s *écriture féminine*, but rather to show how Brooke-

Rose's text already addresses such problems as Irigaray was to later analyse, thus literally forerunning those theories in a very peculiar way. Moreover, addressing those issues in the very fictional practice of her novel, Brooke-Rose's work can be considered as attaining the status of original "critical fiction" or "fictional criticism", anticipating or running counter to the innovative theories of Irigaray.

This Sex Which Is Not One was published as made up of different texts the author wrote over a span of time, none of which had already been released at the time Brooke-Rose published *Between*. Irigaray's reinterpreted Alice, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, has eyes "that recognize the right side, the wrong side, and the other side: the blur of deformation [...] a loss of identity [...] And she's the only one who seems to know who Alice is" (Irigaray 10). These words could perfectly describe the status of the central character in *Between*: she is experiencing a loss of identity as she comes to realise that there is neither wrong nor right side because she understands the mechanism by which society operates. She seems to be the only one certain about her "identity", which is a loss, but a wanted, enjoyed loss, whereas all the people around her try to define her but cannot pin her down, as she *is not*.

Like Alice, the character of *Between* is represented as *frozen, transfixed*, by the plane of male representations: their discourses, their praises, their love are endlessly repeated throughout the novel and reinforce her sense of existing in a loss of identity. She *is not* because she escapes assuming the identity that *they* would like to give her "according to their needs or desires" (Irigaray 17): "He says marry me my sweet and take me as you find me" (B 425). Ideas are continuously tried to be trusted upon her, "ideas [...] why can't you commit yourself wholly to one of them?" (B 426).

Irigaray tells us that "*woman* is never the attribute of the verb *to be*" (Irigaray. 148), as feminine identity cannot be expressed without being caught in the masculine system of representation, and that a woman can have no proper name, for to be named would mean to be reduced to the economy of masculine power. In this connection, Brooke-Rose's avoidance of the verb *to be* throughout the novel acquires the significance of avoiding being "pinned down" by the masculine logic of naming and meaning. In the same way, the lack of a proper name in the character of *Between* seems to refer to the fact that she avoids putting herself under a male protective custody. Many are the instances of "commitment proposals" made to the interpreter

throughout the novel, such as “So why don’t you marry me after all these years?” (B 431); “come live with me and adorn my gracious Regency London house with your charming French accent”(B 414); “As I really love you I want to make you my wife. Do you agree?” (B 431). The interpreter, however, always avoids replying and never accepts “the protective custody of the name of Mister X” (Irigaray 21-2).

As Irigaray explains, in a civilization where the concept of female sexuality is based on masculine parameters, where phallomorphism is privileged and where the one sexual organ, the “one of form, [...] of the proper name, [...] of the proper meaning” (Irigaray 26) is considered the universal signifier, the female sexual organ is nothing but a “non-sex”, a “lack” or “atrophy”, an absence. *Between* addresses directly this masculine logic and calls into question the linguistic convention which lies at its basis,

Et comme l’a si bien dit Saussure, la langue peut se contener de l’opposition de quelque chose avec rien. The marked term on the one hand, say, the feminine, grande, the unmarked on the other, say, the masculine, grand. Mais notez bien que le non-marqué peut dériver du marqué par retranchement, by subtraction, par une absence qui signifie. Je répète, une absence qui signifie eine Abwesenheit die simultaneously etwas bedeutet. (B 426)

The initial literal repetition of Saussure’s linguistic dyad, however, is here rehandled and reversed: the unmarked (masculine) can also be said to derive from the marked (feminine) by subtraction, thus ironically subverting the masculine dichotomy *tout/pas tout*. Similarly, the “Abwesenheit die etwas bedeutet, etwas anderes als bestellt” (B 442), could be interpreted as the absence of love or sexual intercourse, which depends on men offering the woman something different from what she wishes, something which does not correspond to *her* pleasure, to what she “has ordered”. Love, as men conceive it, is not what she wishes for, because the masculine conception of love does not match hers, or rather does not even *take account of* hers, being only based on their own egoistic needs. The difference *between* woman’s and man’s pleasure is evident in the following sexual scene,

Man works with hands light brush-stroke size over the rectangles of agriculture bearing plants or parts of plants forest blobs metallic lakes thin with lines man feels as an abstract study in seduction man performs with the precision of the mouthpiece eyes voice hands over limbs that find each other delicious on a creaking bed somewhere along the Romantische Strasse in a Mish-Mash of swift fornication between a hallowed structure and the rigid virginal edifice crashing down the runway with a scream of jets and strong tension of brakes [...] guided by some other distant brain in a glass booth and small white frogs with yellow discs for eyes and a splash of blood until it comes to a standstill du, do you love me, du? (B 447-8)

The male activity is here described as an egoistic practice. The reiteration of the term “man” – “man works”, “man feels”, “man performs”, “until it comes to a standstill” – seems to put the accent on the fact the sexual intercourse is conducted by the man and only inertly experienced by the woman, reduced to a mere passive receptacle for his desire. To this ironically adds the man’s final question, “do you love me?”, to which the interpreter does not reply.

As Irigaray explains in her essay “Women on the Market”, in Western culture women are treated as commodities. The economic, social and cultural order is founded on woman’s exploitation and circulation as an exchange value amongst men. She does not partake in such an economy but as an alienated object of consumption: her body is divided “into two irreconcilable ‘bodies’: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, exchangeable body” (Irigaray 180). In *Between*, the interpreter’s body/mind split and the fact that she is reduced to a passive, “neutralised transmitter” (B 414) for men’s discourses, seems precisely to illustrate Irigaray’s point. Moreover, countless are in *Between* the occasions of the presentation of woman and her body as objects or commodities which can serve men’s needs and desires, as demonstrated by a man referring to the interpreter in these terms,

Bright girl, she translates beautifully don’t you think? Says the boss. Meaning in his greying English way come live with me and adorn my gracious Regency London house with your charming French accent not to mention cuisine your German super-Aryan liveness. (B 414)

Numerous are also the hints at the fact that a woman needs a man’s “protection” to exist in this world. “I have taken her under my wing” (B 429), says a man about another young female translator. Similarly, a marriage proposal made to the interpreter reveals the logic of appropriation which subtends men’s discourse. This logic is exposed for the proposal is humorously presented as the subtext of a phrase book (i.e. a ready-made, static discourse),

the phrase book says listen to this under Marriage Proposal: As I really love you I want to make you my wife. Do you agree? Have you an opinion for the marriage? Did you want to test by means of engagement? Do you want to create our own home? Do you like children? Saith the book, the phrase-book saith. (B 431)

In order for the female body to retain its exchange value – elucidates Irigaray – there must be “*at least two men* to make an exchange” (Irigaray 181). The notion of two men “contending” the same woman is presented in *Between* as Siegfried recalls

earlier times, when another man married the woman (the central character) he loved: “I witnessed [...] the snatching away of meine Liebe under my very nose thinking all right then he will hurt her and I’ll bide my time” (B 473).

Irigaray explains how women are only allocated marginal and limited positions in society. Women can be mothers, virgins or prostitutes, there are no other social roles for women outside of these highly stereotyped tropes. Under such a perspective, the proper name represents the monopoly of power of the man – either the father or another man – who owns the woman. The character of *Between* bears no definite value as she is neither a mother, nor a wife any longer. Her father disappeared when she was a child and never speaks in the novel, and even though we are told that she brings her father’s surname, this is never uttered and non-utterance clearly equals to non-existence in a world where significance and reality are instituted by and through language. She is neither a virgin nor a prostitute: the virginal images and references refer to her “denied” sexuality rather than to her factual virginity. She evades, escapes, anyone who wants to “own” her, thus refusing and avoiding being a use value among men.

Woman’s desire involves, for Irigaray, a different economy, one which is not single or linear, her pleasure takes place in the touch within herself, as she touches herself continuously. Woman “is neither one nor two [...] She resists all adequate definition” (Irigaray 26), and that is why her words are often deemed as illogical, contradictory from the perspective of stable reason, “inaudible for whoever listens with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand” (Irigaray 29). In order to understand women’s language, for Irigaray, one should listen outside of the dominant logic. In fact, in *Between* woman’s desire may seem to be absent at a first reading, yet it can be discovered at a more attentive reading in the multiple and allusive sexual shapes of oval windows or small rectangular windows “with rounded corners” (B 402), of “rectangles of agriculture brush-stroke size” (B 398), or in the diamond shapes that recur all through the narrative, as for instance when we read that the headboard of one of the hotel beds she sleeps in is “patterned in horizontal flat diamond shapes” (410), or else when we read: “beyond the small rectangular window and still on behind the eyelids closed, open, closed, open” (B 406), where the opening and closing could be read as an allusion to the opening and closing of the

female sexual organ, which touches itself continually. These images seem to allude to the interpreter's auto-erotic practice, by means of which she can recuperate her own, otherwise denied, pleasure.

If the economy of female pleasure is different from the masculine linear one, then the economy of the text also differs from that of a conventional work, conceived as a linear development of meaning in time and space. As already seen in the previous chapter, in fact, *Between* disrupts any pattern of "well-constructed" discourse as intended in the traditional way. It is not a text to be read with a "fully elaborated code in hand", but it rather challenges any logical "ready-made grid" and stable code. The text is open to multiple interpretations. Like Irigaray's concept of pleasure, *Between* involves a *different economy* which I would call a different economy of reading pleasure.

Inquiring whether this diversity of female desire and language should be read as "shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality? A sexuality denied?" (Irigaray 30), Irigaray wonders whether woman will "not be left with the impossible alternative *between* a defensive virginity, fiercely turned upon itself, and a body open to penetration that no longer knows, in this 'hole' that constitutes its sex, the pleasure of its own touch" (Irigaray 24). In *Between*, the references to a violated and/or denied sexuality are countless, such as those to the empty beds which lie "empty and tightly made" (B 420), or the sickening image of men as "stones [who] talk and walk and make semblance of love have fun until they come to a standstill" (B 426), or else the reference to the male "hallowed structure like a minaret piercing the Milky Way and hats geschmeckt?" (B 452), the description of the man who "works with hands eyes mouth hallowed structure into the rigid steel glass vessel of conception" (B 450), or the hint at being "aghast at the death of more than the five senses to the shaking dry male sobs until they come to a sickening standstill" (B 554), up to the point the interpreter's body is seen like a virginal one, described variously as a "rigid virginal edifice" (B 448), or as a "frail skeletal nun in a glass case. Heilige Munditia. Patronin der alleinstehenden Frauen" (B 490), or else as the "Corpus Sanctae Munditiae Martyris" (B 567). When she occupies a double bedroom by herself, the absence of the "masculine unmarked" is hinted at by means of the "eiderdown untumbled puffed

out virgin-bellied [...] from which only angels and ministers of grace take off” (B 461).

In her essay “Psychoanalytic Theory: Another Look”, Irigaray opposes Freud’s conception of the penis envy, which brings the woman to desire a child as a compensation, a “gap-filling” value (Cf. Irigaray 34-67). In line with Irigaray’s critique, the character in *Between* demonstrates having pulled herself out of the masculine economy. Instead of trying to fill in her existential gap with a child, she lives *in* that very gap – she lives *in between* – and refuses to fill it as society recommends. In this light, the several references to plants and parts of plants in the question asked at the Customs and Excise, “have you anything to declare any plants or parts of plants growing inside you” (B 413), can be read as enquiries about any children the character might have. The same question is repeated in different languages, “Bitte Pflanzen oder Pflanzenteile zu deklarieren” (B 565), so as to demonstrate that even if the language changes, the question remains the same, that every language is subservient to the same system. Someone suggests her that hysteria could be stopped “at once with the vessel of conception [...] as a recommended alternative for relaxation” (B 417), but she translates this as “come live with me and grace my London house with your elegant cosmopolitan ways” (B 417).

If, for Lacan, sexual identity is constituted by and through language, for Irigaray this language is man’s discourse and women are excluded from it. Their “exclusion is *internal* to an order” (Irigaray 88), an order where the question whether a female language is possible “is not even raised” (Irigaray 90), since if it was raised, it would disrupt the logic of masculine discourse. The “plants or parts of plants” the interpreter is enquired about could also be seen as the discourses of power which could be breeding inside her body, “stifling your strength with their octopus legs undetachable for the vacuum they form [...] in a death kiss” (B 537). The plants are the ideas society needs women to bear in order to enforce its power on them. Such ideas, produced by means of language, are stranger to women, do not belong to them, and therefore generate a “vacuum” in them as they are dispossessed of their selves.

Irigaray poses herself against the Lacanian conception of sexuality as linked to language. According to Lacan, she explains, it is to be assumed that women have no unconscious, as their unconscious is constituted through the masculine language, is

something that men have given them. Therefore, “psychoanalysing a woman, amounts [...] for a man, to reappropriating for himself the unconscious he has lent her” (Irigaray 94). This mastering procedure can be witnessed through men’s discourses throughout Brooke-Rose’s novel, such as for instance in the fragments of the audiences the interpreter attends at the “Vicariatus Urbis” in Rome in order to obtain the annulment of her marriage,

- So you decided in advance madame, to divorce if it didn’t work, thus annulling the contract in the eyes of God?
- Plus ou moins.
- My child you must use words more precisely. Did you or did you not?
- Oui mon père. (B 458)

The church representative tries to find out whether she had decided in advance to divorce in case her marriage did not work. He calls her “My child” and urges her (“you *must*”) to use language “more precisely” (!). The possessive adjective and the modal verb clearly represent an attempt to patronize her person (and her language) through language. The character’s answer is apparently subservient – “Oui mon père” – and could be viewed as an ironical/critical hint at the submission of women to men, primarily through language. Yet, it is a perfect example of the mimicking process we will consider below. The process of psychoanalysing/mastering a woman is also evident in *Between* as a German officer scrupulously interrogates the interpreter in order to “make sure of [her] undivided loyalty” to the Reich (B 489). Men are continually seen as they try to “discover” truths and reasons in the interpreter, as they try to understand her by way of *their* own logic. However, *her logic* lies outside of their economy, it is not a “logic” as they conceive it.

As Irigaray explains, getting a woman to speak is to reduce her to man and make her exist as a womb, “the unconscious womb of man’s language” (Irigaray 94). At this juncture, all the womb-related images in *Between* acquire salient implications. The interpreter is seen as a passive receptacle which receives and incorporates the discourse/meaning men instil into her, a “cavern womb belly vessel ship temple sepulchre or holy grail with the same confusional sliding from active to passive from swallower to swallowed from container to contained” (B 542), or else “a sack, a basket, a container cavern womb belly vase vehicle ship” (B 510). This passive *womanoid-receptacle* would thus receive all meaning from outside and reproduce it, without knowing anything about itself, being a function of men without existing in

itself. This idea is reinforced by the description of the translator's cabin and equipment: the glass booth is again a metaphor for the womb, but it is a glass, cold one. The translator merely receives the ideas from the outside and incorporates them "obediently" into her. We see how what man does is making the woman speak as he wants. A man's relation to a woman is a relation to himself, the "narcissistic pleasure that the master, believing himself to be unique, confuses with that of the One" (Irigaray 103), a relation where the language of love is the discourse of man speaking love to himself. The love letters and postcards she receives at various times and which she describes as "a circular dance so much smaller than the small love behind" (B 544), are an attempt on man's part to reappropriate woman to his own discourse. On a postcard from Venice, for instance, the sender defines *himself* "un vieil ami qui vous admire toujours, qui n'oublie pas la gentildonna 'che fa tremar di claritate l'âre' [...] signed BC" (B 475). Here the object of the letter is not the addressee (the woman) but the addresser (the man), as he practically talks *of* himself and *to* himself, to the point of taking for granted his name and signing with his initials. This signature gives way to the following ironic comment on the character's part: "BC.? Or could it represent H.C.? H.O. or even E.C.? F.S? S.O.?" (B 475-6). That scrabble on the postcard could signify anything, any name, and indeed it is not even a question of deciphering the name, for it is always the same "man's discourse", re-enacted in the same old way. The initials "BC" could be standing for "Before Christ", so as to ironically suggest man's discourse's old features. This interpretation seems to be reinforced by the quotation from Cavalcanti,⁵ emblem of the long-established tradition of masculine love discourse. As for the relationship between language and love, we read: "love lost or never gained lying forgotten under layers of civilization thickening sensibilities such as for instance a language that actually means something in the light of that love or vice versa" (B 501). As language is subservient to the dominant ideology, it can only express love as men perceive it. Expressing a feminine love is impossible in the light of that language and *vice versa*: neither a feminine love nor a feminine language can find place in this civilization.

⁵ "Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira/che fa tremar di chiaritate l'âre" (Cavalcanti 8).

For Irigaray, articulating the question of woman is not a question of replacing the order of things with another one which would in the end represent another power discourse not dissimilar from the former one. What is needed “is to disconcert [...] representation according to *exclusively* ‘masculine’ parameters [...] not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it [...] but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallocratic law” (Irigaray 68). In *Between*, the several statements about the fact that “nothing, rien, niente deserves a flow of rash desire love loyalty ambition” (B 499), along with the question “what difference does it make?”, which is constantly repeated throughout the novel, could be interpreted in this connection. The character of *Between*, used to the “presentation of opposite viewpoints on every aspect of an instant world” (B 498), understands that every discourse amounts to the same speech of power, and aims not at replacing that discourse (any discourse of/on truth implies/reproduces the same mechanism of power) with a new one, but rather at exposing its logic, while taking herself out of its mechanism. As Irigaray theorised, it is the discourse of mastery that women need to challenge, disrupt and subvert, revealing,

the conditions under which it is produced [...] the architectonics of its theatre [...] its geometric organization [...] its actors [...] their dialogues [...] the *mirror*, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself. (Irigaray 74-5)

The dynamics of power must remain hidden and uninterpreted to hold their control. In order to be revealed and to shake their functioning, “they have to be re-enacted [showing] how the system is put together, how the specular economy works” (Irigaray 75). *Between* seems to perfectly follow the steps of Irigaray’s subverting strategy, laying bare the mechanism of the production of power, revealing:

“the conditions under which it is produced”

Which is first of all a mechanism of control of ideas and “loyalties”, as exemplified by the question the character is constantly asked at the Customs and Excise. At the airport, “concrete men [in a] concrete building [...] search every suitcase not for liquor jewels drugs but ideas, in dangerous print” (B 439). The mechanism of control of ideas is one which repeatedly tries to make her commit to fixed beliefs. It is a discourse that wants her to decide between *one* idea *or* the other, for *in between* lies disorder, chaos, which society is afraid of, cannot tolerate, as it threatens its order, its basis: “come off it, come down into one world und so weiter

weiter gehen, immer geradeaus dann links" (B 445). The interpreter is "bombarded" by different discourses which tell her what to do, which pretend to tell her something about herself. Even the horoscope is part of all the discourses that try to impose fixed meaning on her, in a predictive, oracular future tense, "La lune vous rend particulièrement sensible. Vous vous sentirez obstinés, prêts à mal interpréter les intentions des autres" (B 425). The same "Bitte Pflanzen oder Pflanzenteile zu deklarieren" (B 565) which we have already considered above, could be viewed as a request to produce social or ideological "roots".

"the architectonics of its theatre"

The illusory organization of society is laid bare and the social structure based on the use of language is presented in pretentious terms as the attendants to the conferences are introduced as at the theatre: "Ladies and gentlemen" (B 424), or "Now ladies and gentlemen" (B 510), or again "the Lord Mayor speaks [...] bidding everyone welcome [...] to this ancient city" (B 402), where the "ancient city" might be viewed as referring to the old structure of power.

"its geometric organization"

Numerous are the geometric images throughout the novel: ubiquitous are for instance the "tall rectangular tombstones" (B 426, 429) and we are even told that "stones do talk [...] into microphones" (B 416), so as to make clear that stones are men, defined by their phallic form (Stonehenge), but else defined as "tombstones": they are old and static. Occasionally we find the description of some young woman "who shapes her words with gestures that weave circles round him" (B 403), a woman conforming to masculine discourse, flattering a man with her words, conforming to his wishes as she is, "weaving circles" with her words, reproducing the female geometric "counterpart" of the rectangular shape. A circular form is a hollow container, in other words what men want women to be. The interpreter seems to warn the young woman by saying "do not weave circles round him [...] that wrap up la Vérité" (B 407).

"its actors"

Whereas female names are almost completely absent from *Between*, the novel is overflowing with male names, exasperatingly frequent and ironically inflated into approximated terms: "Signor Ingegnere Giovanni-Battista di Qualcosa or Comrade

Pan Bogumil Somethingski” (B 418), “Father Brendan O’Carawayseed or such some name” (B 397), “the Lord Mayor” (B 402), “professor William Something” (B 467), “Flight Lieutenant This and Captain That” (B 492), “Prince Boris de Czarevitch or Somesuchovitch Directorovitch” (B 438). Men’s ranks and social standings are cast into an highly ironical light by the novel’s central consciousness, who exaggerates their names so as to present them as fake “puppets” or actors of a theatre with pompous, empty names.

“their dialogues”

The mechanism of *Truth*, of “the true state of things” (B 407), is constructed by men at congresses and conferences, within a world organized by round tables and ruled according to their discourses. Everybody talks and talks endlessly but does not listen to what other participants say, each speaker waiting “impatiently for his turn to read an interminable paper that has nothing to do with anything said before, you know, each one more concerned with output than intake” (B 422). That is why she says that “words prevent any true EXCHANGE” (B 399). It is *their* words that prevent any true exchange, “with all ingredients historical philosophical and social determining the involution of this our civilization” (B 441). “All ideas have equality before God he will say [...] his words flowing into the ear through earphones in France and down at once out of the mouth in to the attached mouthpiece in simultaneous German” (B 398). Their dialogues are reported as they engage themselves in the *making of truth*, in the *making of the world*: “Mesdames messieurs vous allez écouter aujourd’hui plusieurs discours by eminent specialists on methods of increasing the output of edible protein” (B 474), or “As for the under-developed areas, we shall organize discussions to find out how best we could help those countries” (B 428). We understand how it is always and only through “discussions”, i.e. dominant ideology, language serving the master discourse, that the world gets organized according to men’s needs and desires. The novel is disseminated with “plusieurs discourse by eminent specialists” which claim to define universal truths. As Irigaray puts it, the “phallic economy [...] goes hand in hand with the economy of truth” (Irigaray 100). Brooke-Rose alludes variously to such an economy as “The true history” (B 469), or as “the vital lie” (B 555), sustained by language as its “divine principle” (B 555). We read about the “fragile truths and lost mysteries that

surround us in this our masculine-dominated civilization” (B 510), “under layers and layers of vital lies” (B 507).

“the mirror that allows the subject to reflect itself by itself”

The flat mirror, as elucidated by Irigaray, is the one that the masculine subject uses in language for his self-reflection. In it, woman appears only “as the inverted other of the masculine subject [...] or again as lack” (Irigaray 129). In order for feminine desire to emerge, for Irigaray, this flat mirror and its functioning must be revealed and turned upside down, becoming a “concave mirror” which disturbs the staging of representation according to masculine parameters. In *Between*, the mirror and its specular deceiving mechanism are openly referred to when we read that the “man talks to the mirrored reflection of the lady and the lady talks to the mirrored reflection of the man. Seen from the profile they do not proffer anger dissatisfaction and polite attempt to please at each other at all but only at the mirror” (B 466), or else when the text presents us with a mirror revealing “the reflection staring up at the reflection of the invisible man behind the reflection and back at the reflection” (B 507). This “specularization” does not correspond to woman’s desire, which can be rediscovered only if she does not reduce herself to one, as society imposes her to do, which is exactly what the character in *Between* is doing, avoiding to “come down into one world”, evading any set idea, definition or belief and enjoying her own multiplicity.

The initial step for thwarting the discursive mechanism of power is, for Irigaray, mimicry, which implies reproducing the part that history has always assigned to woman: by assuming that role intentionally, women start converting their subordination into an affirmation. Woman should “resubmit herself [...] to ‘ideas,’ in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible” (Irigaray 76). As Irigaray explains, “the mimetic role [...] presupposes that one [...] can *copy* anything at all, anyone at all, can receive all impressions, *without appropriating them to oneself*” (Irigaray 151)⁶. This is precisely what the interpreter of *Between* does: she copies and translates all the discourses she receives, without

⁶ In chapter five we will see how the concept of translation is readdressed in highly original terms, in that repetition is always a reappropriation of discourse for the purposes of exploding signification into multiplicity.

ever appropriating them for herself. The discourse that subtends most of Brooke-Rose's novel is made up of scraps of discourses replicating "masculine parameters", where proper meaning and universal truths are affirmed and dispensed. A recurring instance is that of the "divine principle descending into matter" (B 424), where the divine principle is the word, language, used to state truths at the numberless conferences she is working in. The discourse of mastery which claims to institute Meaning and Order is automatically repeated and therefore exposed by the interpreter of *Between*. Mechanical repetition does not entail acceptance, on the contrary, through it, woman frees herself from the hold of the father's law that wants her to accept his word. Experiencing a typical feminine status, she finds the way to release herself from it. Far from entering into "active" fight against male ideology – as that would mean playing *their* game – she apparently and "obediently" mimics the feminine role historically assigned to women. She becomes a "word reproducing machine": although "rhetoric flows into the ear" (B 399), her "self" remains outside of that mechanism precisely because she is mimicking it. When asked about her commitment to any idea, for example, she replies, "Ideas? We merely translate other people's ideas [...] No one requires us to have any of our own" (B 413). In this connection, even the "glass booth" she is in when translating and her closed bodily posture can be seen as her shelter from the attack of that discourse. Similarly, when she attends the meeting for the petition of her wedding annulment, she apparently takes in the discourse of mastery submissively, but in fact she is mimicking it. Her hands are laid on the table-cloth in the same position as when she translates, and under the table she crosses her ankles so as to close the circuit (Cf. B 343). The discourse she is mimicking cannot get at her. She defiantly remains outside of it.

Irigaray defines feminine writing as a practice where every dichotomy breaks, where no truth is ever posited (Cf. Irigaray 79-80). If the syntax of masculine language is a means of masculine self-representation, a "feminine syntax" would do away with subject or object, would not privilege the one of form, proper meaning or proper name, it "would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation" (Irigaray 134). Feminine writing would never be fixed but always fluid, its main characteristic being *simultaneity*, so as to resist and explode any established idea and concept: a "different mode of the

‘syntactic,’ in language and in the body” (Irigaray 147) which would involve an *other* economy of meaning. Its syntax would be “deciphered in the gestural codes of women’s bodies. But, since their gestures are often paralyzed, or part of the masquerade, [...] they are often difficult to ‘read’. Except for what resists or subsists ‘beyond’. In suffering, but also in women’s laughter” (Irigaray 134).

Irigaray’s focus on both suffering and laughter is crucial to our reading of Brooke-Rose’s novel. We have already seen how *Between*’s narrative rejects the “artificial constraints of time and space” (Irigaray 217), how its language disrupts any notion of syntactical consequentiality, how its syntax blurs the distinction between subject and object, not privileging the one, but rather exposing the logic of the proper meaning and parodying that of the proper name. Its central character refuses to be “owned” by any truth or person claiming to represent the truth and does not appropriate any stable meaning for herself. Her body is often seen as paralyzed (suffering), it is used only as a mechanic tool to convey the discourse of power, but the act of repeating implies mimicry, thus becoming the masquerade of femininity through which she resists *beyond* that discourse. However, the interpreter also and crucially resists beyond that discourse by means of humour. She resists in the play of language, in laughter. By means of linguistic humour, she attains her freedom, her “non-existence” *within* that system, or else her beloved existence *beyond* it. Humour becomes one of the fundamental ways to escape the schemes of power-ideology.

Irigaray explains that when the basis of the construction of discourse comes to daylight, the discourse - a flat and rigid surface - gets “unrounded” and “relativized” by the light. In *Between*, we find several images of rigid surfaces whose corners are “rounded” by the light. We read for instance that “the dawn has quite unrounded the corners of the cupboard made of teak” (B 397). The wooden corners get unrounded by the dawn – exposure to light relativizes the rigid male structures/surfaces. Moreover, throughout the novel, the many references to the “dusty demolition” of crumbling façades – those big and seemingly stable façades of society which conceal a much smaller reality (Cf. B 453) – reinforce the idea of the subversion of power ideologies and structures.

Feminine writing, for Irigaray, would reject closure, involving repetition and consequently a different temporality, thus retraversing differently the dyads of our

culture (Cf. Irigaray 154). The narrative of *Between* subverts the binary dichotomies on which our society is based: “Wejście/Wyjście. What difference does it make? In/out, up/down, container and contained. To go in you have to go out, up, down and vice versa” (B 432). Addressing the Western culture system of dyads, the text hints at the fact that the supremacy granted to one term over its opposite in a relation of positive/negative just depends on the point of view adopted, and that both terms are in fact complementary: each one depends on the other, none of them is superior to the other.

Irigaray explains that one of the historically and “scientifically supported” dyads of our culture is the one of solids/fluids. In respect to sexual difference, this dyad reflects the same dynamic of specularization explained above: fluids are in a relation of lack to the solids. Science and history have always privileged solids over fluids. Language maintains a “*complicity of long standing between rationality and a mechanics of solids alone*” (Irigaray 107). The resistance that fluids brings on solids, continues Irigaray, is not addressed by science as fluids present certain properties which resist being incorporated in the master logic of solids and which, if given proper recognition, would jam its theoretical machine. Pure mathematics has analyzed fluids only in terms of “spring-points [...] whirlwind points, which have only approximate relation to reality. Leaving some remainder. Up to infinity: the center of this ‘movements’ corresponding to zero supposes in them an infinite speed, which is *physically unacceptable*” (Irigaray 109). In *Between*, fluid surfaces like seas or lakes are perceived as solid or semi-solid from the airplane window, as we read for instance of “the clay Atlantic you could cut with a knife” (B 411), or about the forest that “blobs metallic lakes” (B 398), or else that “the sea looks solid earth or clay you could cut through with a blunt knife pick up in handful moulds perhaps into a moon marine mother of death birth menstruation or fear of something else not ordered” (B 401). The fact that in all these images the fluids are seemingly solid seems to suggest that logic and rationality try to reduce liquids to the economy of solids, to explain them as solids. What is more, the infinite speed Irigaray comments on is presented in *Between* through the image of the plane, which “flies immobile at eight hundred and thirty kilometres an hour” (B 395) and which determines the interpreter’s “lost senses of locality” (B 397). It is a soaring yet immobile speed as

perception does not notice it. Irigaray also talks about the necessity to “escape from a dominant *scopic* economy [...] in an economy of *flow*” (Irigaray 148), and I read the images of the plane and the blurred visual perceptions from its height as an avoidance of the “scopic” as opposed to the flow of things.

Woman, for Irigaray, does not speak as a subject which is always identical to itself. She speaks “fluid”, as two, and her discourse resists static interpretation. In her language,

sound is propagated in her at an astonishing rate [...] Which results in one of two things: either the impact of signification never comes [...] or else it comes [...] only in an inverted form [...] the small variations in the rapidity of sound then run the risk of deforming and blurring language at every instant [...] Woman never speaks the same way. (Irigaray 112)

In *Between* the mixture of discourses and the high-speed rate at which their sound proliferates result in signification coming in an inverted form: meaning is diffused, fast-paced and forever changing, so that the messages transmitted result in the emptiness of a lost sense of locality. Expressed in the vortex of void, such messages become null. Language is blurred, blunt, fluid, not fixed, and this is also due to the different *speeds* of discourses. Some paragraphs or pages read very fast and the reader’s head almost spins together with the narrative and its lost sense of locality, whereas some others make the reader pause and even stop, slowing down the narrative rhythm, introducing a different cadence and therefore discontinuing it. Such are for instance the narrative passages beginning with “Sometimes however”. Punctuation is basic in the making of the novel tempo: most of narration takes place without any comma or other punctuation mark intruding to “regulate” it, so that the reader is caught up in the flow of discourses and pauses (but not necessarily) only when (and if) a full stop suspends them. In most cases, even when we are presented with parts of discourses that “slow down” the rhythm, punctuation does not intervene, so that although we read “however”, we do not pause after it. In other cases the reading pace is *overtly* played upon, as for instance when – after a really “fast” paragraph – we read,

I. I luoghi. Slowly now. The places: La Francia, la Germania, e soprattutto la Britannia, la dolce Inghilterra dai prati prati? (B 435)

Here we can clearly see how the pace is being slowed down by the numeration at the beginning of the paragraphs (which of course will be lost by the next paragraph), by punctuation (full stops, semi-colon, commas and question marks, so

that in one sentence we find more punctuation marks than in whole pages), and by the languages which render the sense of loss (in places, times and languages) of travel.

Although *Between*, as shown above, perfectly enacts the *feminine* writing Irigaray theorised and can be therefore read as a feminist text, Brooke-Rose's attitude towards the gender issue *transcends* feminism and *Between* does not embody Irigaray's recourse to a *uniquely feminine* language.

It is clear that the author provides a strong critique of the masculine society and language which surround the interpreter, yet she is not advocating an exclusively *feminine* mode of writing. Feminist theorists such as Cixous, Wittig or Irigaray, insisted on the *biological* aspects of women as the basis of their identity. They emphasised women's fundamental *difference* from men and regarded *écriture feminine* as exclusively pertaining to biologically female beings. They believed woman's body to be the site of feminine writing. Brooke-Rose believes that "it is the feminine element in humankind that creates art" (Brooke-Rose 1986 195), yet, contrarily to the feminist extremist attitude, she does believe that this creative element can be present in women as well as in men,

The radical feminists are very much against the androgynous-great-mind stance which was Virginia Woolf's. I am rather for it. Clearly any great mind or indeed any human being has a great deal of feminine and masculine in him, and all male writers have always had a lot of feminine in them. (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 101)

In line with feminist theory, Brooke-Rose opposes Lacan's masculine notion of feminine identity, based on the binarism *tout/pas tout*, presence/absence, where woman always stands on the lacking, weak side of the dyad. However, she also opposes the feminist stand which considers womanliness as an essential aspect of women's *biological* status, a status rooted in the pre-Oedipal phase, before the repression caused by the entrance of the subject into the order of society. *Between*, in fact, *deconstructs* the notion of identity – both masculine and feminine – by demonstrating how identity is a linguistic construct. Identity is constructed by and through language: feminine identity does not exist as such, but only as the result of the masculine manipulation of language. The idea that identity is entirely a product of language is primarily exemplified by the fact that it is through language that the masculine society the interpreter inhabits tries to exercise and perpetuate its power on women. In this way, *Between* shows that, as de Beauvoir said, "One is not born,

but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir 8). As already seen, in fact, the novel shows that the dichotomy marked/unmarked can be easily reversed *by means of language*: the masculine *grand* can be also said to derive from the feminine *grande* by subtraction. Identity, as we conceive it, does not exist. It is only a product of language, as demonstrated throughout the novel by the interpreter’s attitude towards the society which tries to thrust fixed signification upon her by means of its totalising use of language.

In this light, Brooke-Rose’s narrative practice amazingly anticipates Kristeva’s deconstruction of sexual identity which was to spread on the critical scene in 1974. For Kristeva, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine is metaphysical. Woman as such does not exist, except as a construct of our patriarchal symbolic order.

If, as the novel implies, everything is constructed by and through language, it follows that the subject can free itself from the grip of the masculine (sclerotic, static) use of language by means of language. This is perfectly demonstrated by the interpreter of *Between*: the way she employs language becomes a way to oppose the masculine logic which subtends society and to freely enjoy her own existential status, her own lack of identity. *Between* thus describes the totalizing logic of power of our society and shows the way a human being runs the risk of being trapped within it. Opposing this state of things, the interpreter, who happens to be a woman because women are those who suffer most from the present state of things, succeeds in rejecting totalization and escapes the masculine logic of the society she inhabits.

One peculiar way in which Brooke-Rose could be defined as a “feminist” writer, therefore, is offered by her particular concern with the place the feminine creative element has in language. In *Between* the interpreter strives to extract a sort of “minor” language from the predominant patriarchal one. She succeeds in building up her own subversive language by means of her multilingualism. She rehandles the static power structure of signification by means of a pastiche of different languages, finding *in between* the dominant discourses a way of recuperating her linguistic creativity. Aware of the fundamentally totalizing logic of *la langue*, she tries to find a personal solution in order to free herself from it *by means* of it. Revealingly,

throughout the text we are presented with the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*,

La langue [...] consists of le langage moins la Parole, une institution sociale, un système de valeurs which escapes from all premeditation since the individual cannot create it or modify it. La parole on the other hand consists of an individual act of selection and actualisation. (B 561)

We are also explained that there exists “a vast disproportion between la langue, a finite systems of rules, and the actual words or speech which vary infinitely” (B 562). The central character in *Between* tries to put her own *parole*, her own individual act of selection and actualisation into practice. In contrast to the rational and linear masculine structure of language privileged by our patriarchal culture, the language of *Between* is blurring, ever-changing, renewing itself at each and every sentence. Irigaray perceives female language as constantly in the process of weaving itself, as a language which “isn’t formed of a single thread, a single strand or pattern”, but which “comes from everywhere at once” (Irigaray 209), and which incessantly embraces words and casts them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. Immobilized are the stones of Stonehenge whose logic the interpreter in *Between* exposes. Immobilization means death, since it implies submission to the fixed structure of *la langue* as opposed to the ever-changing flow of *la parole*.

In her essay “Polylogue”, Kristeva discusses the possibilities for women to re-define themselves with respect to paternal language: feminine identity is not to be found within the bounds of traditional *logos*, which is a masculine prerogative; women have to gain their own identity in the “polylogue”, in a multiplicity of signifiers, in a multiple, heterogeneous language which could be able to reactivate the lost territories of femininity (Cf. Kristeva 1980b). In *Between*, Brooke-Rose constructs *a language made up of the scraps of discourses wrenched from other people’s language*: the protagonist’s own feminine language is to be found *in the interstices of the patriarchal language*. From the crisis of the latter, the interpreter tries to pull out new linguistic creativity. The pattern of language she strives to find is one made up of continual interruptions of her consciousness: her thoughts continually double back upon themselves and weave patterns of memories together with currently happening events.

The idea of the interstices of language recalls the Derridean concept of writing as *différance*, as well as Kristeva’s notion of poetic language, a language where the

Semiotic continuously breaches into the Symbolic and brings about subversion and instability. It is also easy to see how the concepts of dialogism and re-writing, which were to be at the centre of the feminist debate from the seventies onward, are here already addressed and wittingly enacted. As already explained, however, I have decided not to explore lengthily the implications of *Between* in relation to Derrida's deconstruction and Kristeva's poetic language, dialogism and intertextuality. Although *Between* already puts itself in line with such theories, I will extensively consider them in relation to *Thru*, where they are fully enacted and developed and where Brooke-Rose's experimentation reaches its highest ratification.

In *Between*, the interpreter's peculiar use of language becomes a way of discovering the *infinite range of possibilities* hidden in language, a way of bringing into actualisation the creative (feminine) power of language, in contrast to the masculine operation of making the "divine principle of words descending into matter" (B 555). Throughout the novel, many discourses come back slightly varied and in different contexts, acquiring each time new nuances of meaning, so as to demonstrate the infinite possibilities of actualisation of *la langue* into *la parole*. The potentiality becomes act. The interpreter's multilingualism acquires a fundamental importance to think her position towards language. Her own *parole* is in fact made up of the peculiar linguistic pastiche already considered. She finds her language *between* the volume of languages and *between* the interstices of the dominant masculine language, by means of bits and pieces left out from the discourses of other people.

The central character's adventure becomes an heroic *exploration* of the possibilities that language offers, by means of its gaps, to recreate *a new language out of the old one*. Such an exploration is made into the abysses of language, which the interpreter descends as a crucial experience of her subjectivity, an experience which seems to be strictly associated with her being a woman, with a feminine principle of circularity and descent, as opposed to a masculine principle of linearity and ascension. Her descent is viewed as being made "anticlockwise" and with a "spiral" movement (Cf. B 544), as opposed to a straight masculine motion and to the linear development of meaning in masculine language. The myth of depth bears feminine connotations *par excellence* and the text constantly stresses the "descending

aspect of depth, night, femininity” (B 502-503) in relation to the interpreter’s exploration of language. *Between* thus seems to counter masculine religious and mythological systems with feminine ones.

However, at a deeper look, the novel opposes the dichotomy masculine/feminine. Rather than exclusively feminine, in fact, the interpreter’s exploration of language bears mythological and anthropological *androgynous* associations. The androgynous value of the mythology *Between* employs supports Brooke-Rose’s deconstruction of the male/female binarism touched upon above and exemplifies the author’s conception of creativity in humankind.

The peculiar journey into the depth of language she embarks on is in fact denoted by many references to androgynous divinities: “Most lunar and vegetation divinities have a double sexuality, Artemis,⁷ Attis,⁸ Adonis,⁹ Dionysos” (B 504)¹⁰. These four divinities bear many resemblances to each other. First and most importantly, they participate in the same fusion of femininity and masculinity or, to say it better, the same sort of *lack of a definite gender*. Artemis remains in fact chaste. She does not “share” her gender, and bears masculine connotations in her attributes as a warrior. Attis emasculates himself. Adonis represents the feminoid man *par excellence*, and Dionysus shows feminine connotations as well: he was dressed with woman’s clothes and the processions made in his honour were

⁷ Daughter of Zeus and Leto (the night), Artemis is the personified moon, as opposed to her brother Apollo, personification of the sun. She is imagined as the purest of the virgins, protector of chaste women. Equipped with bow and arrows, Artemis scours woods and mountains during the night and confronts enemies without fear (Cf. Cinti 39-40).

⁸ Also called Ati, he is a handsome youth, loved by Cybele, the Goddess of fecundity, mother of all the gods and procreator of everything. Cybele designated Attis as her priest on condition that he would preserve his chastity. Unfortunately, Attis infringed his oath and Cybele, enraged, expelled him from her service. Attis repented and evirated himself. Cybele, moved by his act, turned him into a pine-tree. The ancient populations identified Attis with plants or trees which do not bear any fruit or seed. He moreover symbolises the cycle of death and rebirth of nature through the seasons (Cf. Ronchetti 117-8).

⁹ Adonis was entrusted to Persephone by Aphrodite, with the task of bringing him up. Later on, Persephone, fond of Adonis’ beauty, did not want to give him back to Aphrodite. Zeus decided the case between the two goddesses: Adonis would spend alternatively four months of the year with each of the two and the remaining four months wherever he wanted. However, Adonis always spent eight months with Aphrodite and four months with Persephone. Adonis thus represents the seasonal cycle of the year, the nature which renews itself in spring (Cf. Cordié 16).

¹⁰ Dionysus was son of Zeus and the mortal Semele. His mother died before he was born and Zeus took him out of Semele’s womb and put him into his leg. When the baby was born, he was given a name that means “twice born”. Hera, Zeus’ wife, wanted to kill him as he was the proof of Zeus’ adulterine relationship. Dionysus was given Atamante and Ino, who dressed him with feminine clothes to hide him from Hera. Later on in his life he descended to Hades in order to save his mother’s life. He succeeded in his undertaking and then ascended to the sky (Cf. Cordié 167-72).

constituted mostly by women. Artemis and Attis represent also sexual infertility. In addition, Attis and Adonis both possess great beauty and epitomize, together with Dionysus, the cycle of death and rebirth: *life out of death*. Adonis and Dionysus were born in fact out of their respective mothers' peculiar death. Dionysus was born twice, as his name signifies. He exemplifies the motif of life out of death, for he descends alive into the reign of death in order to save a dead person, succeeding in his venture and ascending to the sky. Once more, Attis, Adonis and Dionysus have in common their close relationship with nature, with the fecundity of the earth. Both Attis and Adonis embody the eternal cycle of the seasons. Attis was loved by Cybele, and Dionysus encountered her during his wandering and was initiated to her cult. Adonis was born from an incestuous relationship and Dionysus was the fruit of an adulterine love. Adonis was not born a God, but he was deified. Dionysus had a mortal mother but, after his many adventures, he ascended to the sky as a real God.

The resemblances these four deities bear are extremely interesting in that they draw attention to their correspondences with the interpreter in *Between*. The latter is in fact often presented as an androgynous creature. Sometimes the text hints at her sexual intercourses with a man, but we have already seen how she seems to be rather "unconcerned" with them. She almost appears to be willingly ignoring carnal attraction for the opposite sex. The text even states that she is "undamaged by a miracle between the sheets" (B 493), and inversely refers continuously to her auto-erotic practice. On some occasions, her androgynous nature is overtly addressed, such as when we read,

Between existing as a woman and working as a man [...] sits an androgynous douce inoubliable dame desolate at the death of hope faith charity to any rib torn from her chest any small foreign body out of entrails for the forming of a language that actually means something in the light of that death. (B 505)

Turning upside down the myth of the creation of Eve out of Adam's rib, here the rib is "torn from her chest" to create a new language, a language that could be apt to express her femininity, away from the masculine language.

The myth of androgyny, the presence of both sexes in one creature symbolises the initial state of *wholeness* in nature, a state which can generate life and renewal. The reference to androgyny could be thus read as the aspiration to a principle of *totality*, an initial situation of wholeness, a mythical coexistence of opposites, which would cast off any binary opposition between masculine and feminine. We have

already noticed how *Between* seems to invert the dichotomy *tout/pas tout* by showing how the masculine term “grand” can be interpreted as deriving from the feminine “grande” by subtraction. In light of this, it is clear how the feminine “grande” represents a primary greatness, a totality which contains in it masculine and feminine.

In such a situation, absence and presence would be contained in the same creature, a creature which would be simultaneously “container” and “contained”, “swallower” and “swallowed”,

La source [...] breeds plants or parts of plants within the cavern womb belly vessel ship temple sepulchre or holy grail with the same confusional sliding from active to passive from swallower to swallowed from container to contained that we find in all the myths of depth night descent. (B 542)

The symbol of the womb is persistent throughout the novel and strictly associated with the tropes of depth and birth, with the circular and descending movement which can be seen as a *descensus and uterum/inferos*. Images symbolising the womb in *Between* are those of the vase, the cavern, the temple, the ship or the sepulchre within which the interpreter is contained, “the stones contain the temple, cavern, sepulchre which contains one alleinstehende Frau [...] a miniature temple you know” (B 565). However, not only is the interpreter “contained” into these ‘wombs’, but also she is a “container” herself, “In/out, up/down, container and contained” (B 432), she is closed in herself, swallowed within herself. The most insistent image related to the womb is that of the plane: the body of the plane is compared to a whale and the interpreter is caught, like Jonah, inside its womb (B 395, 398, 420, 452, 575), in an liminal, intestinal existential “betweenness” of life and death. The body of the plane is also variously described as a “giant centipede” (B 395, 398, 414, 502), a “ship” (B 406) or an unspecified “animal” (B 400). Even the bus the interpreter travels on while in Greece is described as a “vibrant animal” (B 401). As Mircea Eliade explains, the episode of Jonah can be related to several initiatory rites enacted in many archaic societies and based on the penetration of the subject into the womb of a marine monster, of an animal, of the primordial Great Mother (Mother Earth), into a cavern or else into a vase. The subject is submitted to a figurative death and remains within this emblematic womb for a specified period, depending on the tradition of the folk in question. The permanence within the womb – the *regressus ad uterum* – is considered to engender renewal: the person comes out

of it after having been regenerated (Cf. Eliade 1974 78-81). Hence we can suppose that the sitting position the interpreter usually acquires symbolises the foetal position, the image of birth *par excellence*, but also of death and rebirth. As Eliade explains, the practice of burying the dead into urns in a foetal position, in order to facilitate their rebirth into afterlife, is an archaic tradition which is still shared by many populations (Cf. Eliade 1974 86). We read in fact of the character being “inside the whale perhaps where the body lies in the foetus position” (B 537). The gestation in the womb brings to the initiated new life out of a death experience: from death comes rebirth (Cf. Eliade 1976 251-254). This reinforces our understanding of the interpreter’s journey as a voyage into the abysses of death which she embarks on in order to gain new life. Death also bears the connotations of wisdom, since the dead are traditionally thought of as omniscient and aware of the future (Cf. Eliade 1976 257-8). In this light, the interpreter’s new language could be viewed as a new acquired wisdom, a new ability of the mind.

The experience of the *regressus ad uterum* is ambivalent: to go back to the womb necessarily implies one’s own death. The experience of entering again the uterus is thus related to or identified with the *descensus ad inferos*: descending into hell and confronting infernal monsters means to be submitted to an initiatory trial. The myth of the *descensus ad inferos* is central to many different cultures and involves the rescue of someone or something: Orpheus descends to Hades in order to rescue Eurydice; Jesus descends to Earth in order to rescue Adam and, consequently, to save humanity; the Indian shamans descend to hell to give new life to the souls of sick people; in Polynesia, northern America and central Asia the same myth of a hero who descends to hell in order to recover his dead wife’s soul is to be found. Although within each culture this allegory can acquire slightly different connotations, in each and every case the *descensus ad inferos* is carried on to redeem a soul, it be one’s own wife’s soul, a sick person’s soul or the soul of the whole humanity. What these myths share is their saving pattern: one dies and is reborn in order to recover someone/something (Cf. Eliade 1980 146-7), therefore to acquire something new.

The interpreter is described as “Emerging from the Avernus” (B 446), i.e. from death, and can also be said as ascending to the sky in her innumerable travels by plane and seeing the God sun “fusing”, confounding itself with the night. She thus

embodies the movement of an eternal cycle of death and life, of rebirth out of death. Like Dionysus, she constantly wanders and descends the abysses of death to gain new life. The motif of the *descensus ad uterus/inferos* connotes the interpreter's peculiar experience within language. She embarks on a travel into the depth of language's interstices to bring to life a new *parole*, a new actualization of *la langue* into *la parole*. The concept of travel, basic to the novel, entails language as a continuous journey and research. *Between* in fact exemplifies Barthes' theory of a new kind of narrative journey: if in a classic, realist narrative the plot is based on a precise sequence of events, a journey in which one departs, travels, arrives and stays, in the modern text the sequence and the corollary of action is destroyed, like a journey without origin or *telos*. The text is for Barthes "that space where no language has a hold over any other, where languages circulate", it is therefore "off-centred, without closure" (Barthes 1977 159). *Between* is an open text, in that its syntax is open and its language is open to multiple interpretations, always escaping fixed signification. The open movement of the text supports and subtends the interpreter's journey.

The text does not close on itself, for a movement of departure, travel and arrival would imply an end, a *telos* as the final meaning of the journey. As Barthes puts it,

To depart / to travel / to arrive / to stay: the journey is saturated. To end, to fill, to join, to unify – one might say that this is the basic requirement of the readerly [...] as if the readerly abhors a vacuum. What would be the narrative of a journey in which it was said that one stays somewhere without having arrived, that one travels without having departed - in which it was never said that, having departed, one arrives or fails to arrive? Such a narrative would be a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, of readerliness. (Barthes 1974 105)

In fact *Between* is devoid of a conventionally delineated plot, disrupting any logic of beginning, middle and end. The most frequently recurring scene is that of the plane on its way from one country to another: the traveller does move but she seems to exist in suspension between immobility and disorientation. The plane continues to travel throughout the novel at "a speed of total immobility" (B 406). The plane *en route* becomes the metaphor of the textual open circularity.

The travel the interpreter sets out on is circular, and its symbol – subsumed by the circular movement of the text – is the cosmic serpent or Uroboros. The term Uroboros derives from the Greek and means "devouring its tail". It is usually

described as a circle, a snake, or a dragon devouring its own tail. It thus symbolises the eternal process of life and death. The ambiguity the Uroboros embodies derives from its absolute autonomy, its self-referentiality, which becomes the symbol of the “all-in-all”, the totality of existence, the infinite and cyclic nature of the cosmos. In *Between*, the Uroboros represents the death which is evoked in order to be avoided, a circuit which pertains to the principle of inversion by double negation, as explained in the text,

The eternal cycle of l’ourobouros, the snake eating its own tail indefinitely, not merely as a ring of flesh but expressing the material dialectic of death and life, life and death, death out of life, life out of death in an endless inversion. (B 505)

The “inversion” generated by the Uroboros seems to be exemplified, at the novel’s syntactical level, by the inversion of meaning produced by the peculiar double negations in affirmative sentences already discussed.

The theme of renewal and regeneration as linked to the figure of the cosmic serpent is detectable in other reminders the text does, such as the one to the mythical figure of Python and its enemy Apollo, read in what seems to be the discourse of a travel brochure,

The visitor’s attention turns immediately to the sanctuary of Apollo [...] beneath which the famous oracle used to sit and utter cryptic prophecies [...] on serious matters like war, alliances, births and marriages. Finally, a little higher up stands the Theatre [...] and beyond the Sanctuary lies the Stadium, where the Pythic Games took place to celebrate Apollo’s victory over Python, the legendary monster. (B 430)

In Greek Mythology, Python is the earth-dragon of Delphi. Represented as a female serpent, she is the chthonic enemy of Apollo, and is also associated with the myth of the cosmic serpent.

The Uroboros is the symbol of the Great Mother, the primordial archetype of femininity, represented by mythology as being androgynous. Moreover, we are told that “the myth of the androgynous divinity, present everywhere, does not until later cults of the masculine god, express the idea of the Father transcendent but rather that of the feminoid son” (B 504).

The all-encompassing notion of travel *Between* presents, seems to be strictly linked to the medal of St. Christopher the interpreter wears between her breasts. St. Christopher is depicted as a saint with a dog’s head by the Christian tradition of the seventeenth century. In his figure, two myths converge. On the one hand, he is associated with Cerberus, the many-headed dog guarding the entrance of the reign of

death, whose task is that of preventing the living from entering Hades and the dead from exiting it. On the other hand, he is identified with a giant creature with a dog's head, eater of men, as the text clarifies,

Je fais allusion au Saint Christophe cynocéphale, dating from the 17th century, and represented with a dog's head. Two myths converge here, that of the man-eating giant with the head of a dog and that of the passers of souls, Cerberus. (B 503)

St Christopher is the symbol of the voyage the interpreter makes, a voyage into the abysses of death (of language), which is undertaken in order to subvert the meaning of that death. The interpreter's aim in *Between* is that of rescuing the living *practice* of language. Her endeavour involves the danger of being definitively killed, as we realise from the following words referred to her, "inside the whale, who knows, three hours, three days or maybe hell" (B 395). Consequently, the interpreter makes her voyage accompanied by her Saint Christopher's medal, which guarantees her protection against death and permits her to enter and exit the reign of death,

Here the Christ carried by death inverts the meaning of death [...] accompanying mortals in their perilous journey, et qui devient symbole de l'in-ti-mi-té dans le voyage, as well as protector and talisman against death itself, especially violent death. The mythical imagination invokes death against death in a characteristic double negation. Le Christo-phoros porte le Christ. (B 503)

That made by the interpreter of *Between* is thus a *negative travel against negation*, the negation of language, according to the principle of double denial leading to an affirmation, like the myth of the Uroboros, a circle of death and rebirth. The death of language is evoked in order to be lived and subverted.

This peculiar kind of travel which can be subsumed throughout the novel generates the narrative tempo and spatiality: the structure of the novel is itself circular – as we have seen it starts and ends with the same sentence, only slightly varied. It is an open circular, i.e. spiral movement of time and space, and at the same time a descending movement, again both in space (the *descensus ad inferos/uterum*) and time (the memory of her past life). This peculiar time and space representation is rendered also by means of her travelling by plane: she travels as if suspended, once again, in time and space: the sun often remains in the sky for the whole length of the journey and seems to never set, or inversely the night descends soon even if when the plane took off it was still plain daylight.

The travel and the movement it entails can be thus considered as one of the key insights into the text: the interpreter in *Between* exposes to risk her own life, i.e. her

place in language, in order to gain a new life/language. She embarks in such a travel to prevent the death of communication and regain the long lost faith in the practice of language. This is of course to be achieved *by means* of language.

From what has been said, it should be clear how, far from merely embodying the *écriture féminine* as theorised by Irigaray, Brooke-Rose offers an alternative to the attitude of radical feminists who strive to affirm woman's essential difference from man. The author believes in fact that "specificity in creation is an individual, not a sexual, racial or class phenomenon" (Brooke-Rose 1991 234). Contrarily to feminist theorists who try to overturn the categories male/female, she seems to be more concerned with the *deconstruction* of the gender dichotomy and with a *reequilibration* of the polarities man/woman.

Between exemplifies de Beauvoir's fundamental claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 8), for it shows how identity is a construct generated by language and as such, it can be subverted by and through language. The novel shows that, by and through language, the subject can acquire patterns capable of expressing itself. The interpreter of *Between*, rather than affirming her own femininity, aims at freeing herself from the binaristic logic of the language which surrounds her. She aims at affirming her own freedom and creativity. "[A]ghast at the death of love or maybe merely of language" (B 442), the central consciousness of *Between* succeeds in acquiring – through her linguistic subversive creativity – patterns capable of expressing her own "identity".

If the sclerotic use of language subtends the structures of power and entraps the creative, feminine element of humankind, the always new and humorous use of *la parole* becomes the path which can free us from the hold of a masculine, totalizing logic, and enable us to express our creativity. *Between* shows how the infinite possibilities of actualization of *la langue* into *la parole* counter the rigid and static (and therefore life-threatening) use of the linguistic system. In this way, Brooke-Rose finds a positive exit to the debate on language as related to gender and identity, subverting the masculine/feminine dichotomy and reaffirming, recuperating (rescuing) the importance of the creative aspect of language.

Chapter 4

***Thru* a very subtly planned chaos: a very special sort of unreadable book**

An obscure work, addressed solely to a restricted circle of academics, “a book for the initiate” (Berressem 128), “an elaborate joke written by a narratologist for narratologists” (Turner 1990b 19). This is mostly the way criticism has tended to catalogue Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Thru*. Even when praise has occurred and some of the work’s salient features have been highlighted and appreciated, critics have considered it only as a specialist text, analysing it only in terms of the critical theories it addresses and therefore taking for granted that the novel’s fruition is the sole property of the reader who is interested in such theories. Such widespread judgment has gained Brooke-Rose the reputation of being a “difficult” writer and has hindered the appreciation of her work by the general, non-academic public.

Although *Thru* is without shade of doubt a demanding text, a stunningly postmodernist work which Brooke-Rose – referring to McHale’s definition of postmodernism as challenging the ontological status of reality (Cf. McHale 1987 9-10) – defines as “my most daring ontologically unstable text” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 63), I believe that it must not necessarily be seen as a book for the “field-knowledger”, but rather it can be appreciated by a much larger audience of readers than it has enjoyed so far.

Certainly *Thru* has been written from a very knowing standpoint and its non-professional reader is confronted with what can be seen as an “obscure jargon”, yet even supposing the reader be not competent about the poststructuralist debate the text addresses, Brooke-Rose’s narrative, which aims first of all at *enjoyment* on the reader’s part, is open to *multiple and different levels* of readings and layers of interpretation. It can therefore be appreciated by the prepared academic, by the amateur of specific knowledge, as well as by the reader who happens to be unacquainted with it. Brooke-Rose employs different “technical” jargons in most of her novels, and this does not imply she is literate in their related disciplines or that her reader must be acquainted with their technical terms in order to appreciate them. Pointing out that “no one person *can* know everything” (Turner 1990b 24), Brooke-Rose postulates curiosity as the basis of literature,

Pound once said “you can’t have literature without *curiosity*”, and I think it’s true. One shouldn’t be put off if one isn’t a scientist. Pound wasn’t a Greek or Chinese scholar, but he was curious. (Turner 1990b 24)

On non-specialist readers, *Thru* can have the effect of stimulating them to broaden their knowledge on the theories it targets, or of leading them to think over a number of issues, such as love and its castrating aspect, while amusing them with the “incomprehensible” technical discourse rendered in humorous and metaphorical terms. The specialized jargon the novel presents is used as a metaphor for the events presented and the relationships between the characters. However, the reader does not necessarily have to be aware of the theoretical theories of the time to enjoy the novel. For instance, one does not necessarily have to be aware of Lacan’s concepts of castration and mirror to see that love can be “castrating”, or to understand how looking into a mirror can entail the process of looking at one’s own identity, going through it.

The fact that the text is deemed unapproachable is indicative of the dormant receptivity of the modern reading public, which the author herself defines “the inability – the unwillingness really – to read” (Turner 1990b 24-5). A good novel, one which is worth reading and re-reading, “the art of writing something that will be read twice” (Connolly 19), is not necessarily a simple read, but surely it is enriching.

Thru’s reception has also shown how critics themselves were not ready to see it as a “not-necessarily-demanding” text, to realise how different levels of reading could be appreciated by different kinds of readers, and that in any case *Thru* was able to pay back its reader’s effort, and so again with different “degrees” of reward. My aim is thus not only to contribute to the academic criticism of Brooke-Rose’s novel, but also to passionately call for a re-evaluation of its too much emphasised “obscurity”.

Certainly when it comes to an academic reading of *Thru*, what should be stressed is its importance as an emblematic text which simultaneously addresses the manifold implications the contemporary critical theories brought to light. However, what has been overlooked while calling the attention on the “difficulty” of *Thru*, is that not only does it engage with the theories of structuralism and poststructuralism, but also and most importantly tries to *positively* overcome the tension generated by them. Joining the author’s two vocations, the novelist and the literary critic, *Thru* is

in fact the novel in which Brooke-Rose tries to surmount the pressure she felt between the literary theories she taught and her novelistic practice after arriving in France, “I needed to write this book, because I had gone to France in 1968 and been plunged in all that very new theory and there I almost split apart [...] I needed to write this novel to bring the two ‘MEs’ together again” (Turner 1990b 19). Another elucidation made by Brooke-Rose on *Thru* significantly states,

I’d gone to Paris, I was plunged into structuralism and post-structuralism, I had to teach it and so on, and it blocked me completely, I couldn’t write for several years. Then I wrote *Thru* [...] it’s the most Postmodernist of my books, it really is the most self-reflexive. That cured me, it resolved the tension in a way [...] but I don’t think it did me any good: I got this reputation as a difficult writer from then. (Tredell 32-3)

Thru is a novel that explores the threatened capabilities and potentialities of the novel, a piece of fiction which investigates the fictionality of narrative in order to find an exit to the all-surrounding contemporary critical debate. In this light, Brooke-Rose’s novel embodies a positive countertendency within postmodernist fiction.

The main source of anxiety related to the practice of creative writing which Brooke-Rose sets out to solve originates from the crisis, experienced by the contemporary society to an extremely large extent, of language as a representational tool. The notion of language as having a direct connection with reality, therefore imitating or mirroring it, and the very perception of a world existing prior to language, are the target of a rich and tormented debate. As the author explains, “never before have the mean-making means at our disposal [...] appeared so inadequate, not only to cope with the enormity of the problems we continue to create [...] but simply to explain the world” (Brooke-Rose 1981 4-6). The poststructuralist questioning of language and its ontological status as a means of representation and a channel for a direct relation to reality is at the very centre of the theories and counter-theories of such figures as Wittgenstein, Derrida and Lacan among others. The impossibility of representation is postulated together with (linked to and dependent on) the failure of language to gain access to reality. Postmodernism challenges not only our epistemological capacity, but also the very ontological status of the world that should constitute the object of our knowledge: language, and therefore literature, in the post-Saussurean debate have no connection to reality, they are unable to reflect and convey it, let alone the question of a reality which exists prior to the act of discourse. Lacanian psychoanalysis has introduced the notion of reality as an

absence: reality is not a thing-in-itself, but rather an absence replaced by language: unable to convey reality, language stands for its very absence.

A second source of tension *Thru* sets out to solve is represented by the debate over the death of the author and by the widespread flat characterisation which threatens the ontological status of fictional characters.

Damian Grant links *Thru*'s "narrative anxiety" (Grant 9) to the sentence "but the emperor is naked" (T 602), and to the many references to the fairy tale of the naked emperor to be found throughout the novel (Cf. T 673,681, 735). Paralleling this tale with the textual dynamics of *Thru*, Grant compares the clothes to stories, to the implied author's need to narrate in order to live. For him, the exclamation "the emperor is naked!" brings about the collapse of the whole fictional edifice and leaves its foundations exposed, hence the text's "narrative anxiety".

My aim will be that of demonstrating how, far from presenting narrative anxiety as a means to itself, the dialectic enacted in *Thru* aims at playfully, positively subverting this very anxiety and recuperating the joy of fictionality, its endless play, away from the negativism the crisis of narration had fallen into. For the positive, playful way in which the text overcomes the tension between theory and practice generated by the poststructuralist debate, I believe the work can be considered as representing a *countertendency* within postmodernism, an *exit* to postmodernism and a reaffirmation of the fictional play.

In her recent work on postmodernism, Patricia Waugh has argued that for all its apparent undermining of grand narratives, postmodernism has become a grand narrative itself, trying to subsume all experimentation in its own terms and seemingly denying all alternatives to itself. In other words, rather than being an alternative pathway in itself, it has become a mainstream, a virus which infects with scepticism every field it comes in contact with (Cf. Waugh 1992 12). As I will show, Brooke-Rose's novel represents in this light a positive exception, an enabling alternative to the scepticism of the postmodernist "generative machine" (Connor 16).

Thru is an emblematic text where the issues at stake at the time get addressed, performed and surpassed in the very fictionality of the text. *Thru* not only possesses the capability to "catapult" its readers in the midst of the contemporary cultural milieu, to make them breathe that very socio-cultural atmosphere, but also to take the

debate out of its “dry” academic discourse. It is a text which performs the debate while being at the same time its object. It is a novel which, through the very practice of fiction (object of the debate), enacts that dispute and overcomes its tensions. As opposed to an incessant and “creativity-threatening” theoretical debate, Brooke-Rose does something of the utmost importance in *Thru*: she makes fiction out of that debate’s theories, recasting the importance of the very “fictionality” of fiction and the fact that it should be enjoyed first of all.

The academic approaching the novel has to take into consideration a *myriad* of different themes and issues which reveal themselves throughout the text and are inextricably linked with one another and with its narrative technique. Their presentation and analysis will therefore become a necessary *violence* to the text, the “ripping apart” of the text which Genette sees as unavoidable because of the necessity of looking “successively at elements of definition whose actual functioning is simultaneous” (Genette 1980 215). Nevertheless, I hope to convey, by means of my analytic splitting of the text and beyond it, the originality and high value of *Thru*.

In this chapter, after touching on Brooke-Rose’s choice of the novel’s title, I will describe the basic situation it presents and show the impossibility to ascertain any central, filtering consciousness in its narrative. I will then proceed in my study by focusing exhaustively on the novel’s highly innovative narrative technique(s). This might appear as a merely descriptive enumeration of technical features, yet my choice has been suggested by two motivations.

The first one is the fact that the same Brooke-Rose – as already observed in our initial chapter – has often lamented the scarce attention given to her narrative technique by criticism, which has always tended to analyse her text only in terms of its content. As the author makes clear, a primary and thorough analysis of its form will automatically lead to a better understanding of its content (Cf. Brooke-Rose 2002b 15). In this light, even the title of the novel acquires an important implication, one which is basic to the analysis of the work. The term in fact – an American version of the British *through* – seems to put the accent on its own shape, hinting at the fact that the reader’s access to the textual content must pass *through* its form: *Thru the form, the content*.

The second reason is that the organization of a consequential discourse which would concurrently present narrative technique and theoretical issues is impracticable. In fact, all the technical features of the text are inextricably and *simultaneously* linked to numerous critical concepts, so that considering the many issues tackled while describing *Thru*'s narrative technique would inevitably result bewildering to the reader.

I will then – in the following two chapters – interpret the theoretical implications of *Thru*'s textual features and trace Brooke-Rose's countertendency in relation to the sources of anxiety pointed out above. In the fifth chapter, I will examine the issue of language and representation and illustrate the textual temporality and spatiality availing myself of such critical theories as Bakhtin's dialogism, Kristeva's poetic language and intertextuality, and Derrida's *Text*, *trace* and *architrace*. In the sixth chapter, I will evaluate *Thru* in light of the relation which it postulates among the author, the reader and the text, illustrating how Barthes' notion of the death of the author is played upon and surpassed, while Lacan's and Kristeva's concepts of mirror and castration are developed.

Thru establishes a connection with the three preceding novels by means of its title, a prepositional and monosyllabic one like *Out*, *Such* and *Between*, denoting a topological position which is a multi-complex metaphor for the nature and movement of the text and its relation to itself as well as to the author, characters/narrators and reader. As it will emerge in the course of our study, the idea of *Thru* is *polysemic*, and the mirror image and its reflection have plentiful implications in the text, apart from the most obvious one of recalling Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

However, it needs be said that, while working at the novel, Brooke-Rose decided to change its title into *Texttermination* to mark its difference from the others. Unfortunately, she could not do so because William Burroughs had just published his *Exterminator!* (1974). She therefore had to go back to the previous title (Cf. Hayman and Cohen 5). The fact that she would have preferred to call the novel *Texttermination*, however, is indicative of the great leap forward she accomplishes within and *through* this text in respect to her previous works.

As already observed for *Between*, the reader of *Thru* faces the lack of a conventionally-delineated plot. The "basic situation" the text presents can

nevertheless reconstructed by the reader. It takes place in a seminar class of creative writing in a university, probably in America. The teacher of the class is Armel Santores, whereas Larissa Toren – Armel’s ex wife – is a teacher as well but in another, unsituated university. The students’ creative writing homework is presented in the text together with their class discussions, while the relationship between Armel and Larissa – their break-up and their respective affairs with two alternative dramatis personae, Veronica Masters and Stavro Laretino – is delineated through their dialogues and letters. Various themes can be detected throughout the novel, such as language, love, teaching problems, politics, memory, history and others. However, the text is most emblematic for its narrative technique.

If basic circumstances can be “reconstructed” by the reader of *Thru*, it is clear from the very beginning that they cannot be outlined from the perspective of a single, justifying consciousness. The realistic, omniscient and omnipresent narrator to be found in more traditional fiction is here fragmented into a multiplicity of voices and roles. All the discourses and thoughts continuously mingle and confuse with each other in the text, resulting in none of the “paper-characters” being taken as its most identifiable narrative instance. The characters are indeed urged to “Go forth and multiply the voices until you reach the undeidable” (T 637)¹¹. The notion of undecidability presented here obviously raises critical issues which will be treated extensively in chapter six.

The narrative of *Thru* is still the paradoxical, speakerless, Scientific Present Tense observed in the three preceding novels. Brooke-Rose “puts herself” inside a consciousness to represent in a detached, objective way, what it hears or sees around itself and to present, again objectively, its discourses. We have already noticed in *Between* how the central character was more a “central consciousness” than a character in the conventional sense of the term. Nevertheless, such a justifying figure was there for the reader to be recognised. In *Thru*, the experimentalism with the figure of the character touches a different height: the single, almost obsessive consciousness of *Between* leaves the place to a multitude of narrative instances – the “characters/narrators of the moment” – among which the reader is unable to recognise a single “justifying consciousness” through which the events are filtered.

¹¹ For the wrong spelling of the term “undeidable” see footnote 14, page 224.

Narration continually shifts the viewpoints, sliding swiftly from one consciousness to the other, giving no means to recognise this shift but – retroactively – the context. Indeed, only after reading an entire paragraph can the reader hypothesise on whom has been speaking, while at other times it seems to be utterly impossible to recognise the momentary voice. The initial effect on the reader is disorientation, almost dizziness, at not being capable of recognising where the “voice” comes from time to time. At the very beginning of the novel, an “anonymous text” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 64) describes facts: a car, eyes staring at their reflection in the driving mirror, disembodied voices – which we then conjecture belong to a man and a girl – leave the place to bits of texts and speeches which the reader gradually tries to recognise. Hence the question “who speaks?”, which is not only the famous Barthesian question, but also the Lacanian question “qui parle?”, which appears on the very first page of the novel and is then repeatedly asked, in English, French and Italian.

A first possible narrator could be a “collective one”: the students of the seminar class, whose task is to invent stories, paradoxically transforming the narrative pieces they elaborate in a text of which they are themselves both protagonists and narrators. In fact, if initially the teacher seems to be in charge of the class and we see the students obediently submitting their creative pieces for correction, as the text goes further, the students increasingly seem to be “writing” the teachers, inventing imaginative alternative identities for them. The whole class should then be composing a text in which Larissa and Armel appear both as characters and narrators – an hypothesis reinforced by one of the students saying “After all it’s our text, isn’t it? For us only” (T 653).

We could otherwise assume that Armel is writing a novel and Larissa is a character in Armel’s novel. However, we are told that Larissa is writing a novel as well: is she writing the novel we read? Is she inventing Armel in her novel? Is she inventing herself? Is she inventing the class inventing herself?

Larissa Toren’s and Armel Santores’ names are anagrams of each other, “except for ME in hers and I in his” (T 647). The missing letters could be there to represent their incompatibility and inevitable break up, as Larissa seems to hint when telling Armel, “Why ask what went wrong? You can make up answers such as you didn’t find your ME in me or you kept it nor did I find my I in you but kept it” (T

631). For Grant the two forms of the first personal pronoun – *I* and *me* – are the epitomes of the narrative anxiety of the text, in that the two characters' names share anagrammatically the phrase "narrate loss" (Grant 11-12). In my view, the subject pronoun *I* and the object pronoun *me* could be seen as the interchangeability of doer and receiver of action, while none of them is the central consciousness of the novel which "filters" the narration for us. Moreover, none of them is a second or third person pronoun – you/him/her – clearly hinting at the lack of external objectification in the novel: it is an ever shifting internal point of view.

It is then a mutual invention and the reader becomes the more confused when, with a clear reference to Joyce, Armel tells Larissa: "and perhaps it was after all I who invented you though you would not admit this. Certainly you invented me and withdrew, indifferent, paring your fingernails" (T 604-5). All the characters/narrators are authorising and de-authorising each other, deconstructing each other's texts: "You are the sentence I write I am the paragraph, generating each other cutting off each other's word" (T 723), is Stavro's cogent reflection upon mutual creation and destruction.

There is a scene in which Larissa is interrupted while working at her text by a man from Timbuctoo she does not know, a certain Armel, a friend of friends' who happens to be a writer. We wonder at first who this man is, since we were already told that Armel and Larissa were married. We could assume that this Armel is the same man who will later be her husband, this scene being thus a flashback, a reminiscence of their first meeting, i.e. a first degree narrative of Armel and Larissa, authors. But it might well be otherwise: the scene could be an invention of the collective students' narrative, or else Larissa could be writing her text and reinventing Armel, her ex husband, in this way. Significantly enough, at this juncture, Larissa is caught looking through a judas-eye before opening the door to Armel (T 638). This could be a means of emphasising Larissa's role as a narrator, as the one who uses her "point of view" to look at the subject of her narration, as well as ironically alluding to Jude, who may thus stand for the narrator's unreliability, called indeed "the trait-or master of the moment" (T 638). Armel thus not only changes status as object and subject of narration (is he the same from Timbuctoo? Although Larissa's husband is once said to be black, this suggestion is later rejected),

but his identities also acquire different degrees of fictionality. He is seen as inventing Larissa, as being invented by Larissa, and as being a character in the master's narrative. The text ironically and playfully states that coincidences "do happen despite the critics" (T 645).

Every possible assumption on "who speaks" is established only to be revealed and overturned. As Brooke-Rose reveals, "The moment I create something I then decreate it. I break the fictional illusion" (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 92). Each character seems to struggle against the other to take hold of the narrative, to impose each time different reinventions of the story, as is also suggested by the references which cast *Jacques le Fataliste* as one of the innumerable subtexts of Brooke-Rose's novel.

Diderot's Master and his servant are indeed among the numerous narrators of *Thru*. Three times during the novel – significantly at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of it – the master converses with his servant/master/alter ego about the composition of a text which appears to be his own, significantly proclaiming, "Jacques. I am going to break all the commandments" (T 647). Although Larissa and Armel appear at times to be characters of the Master's text, the latter declares, "this woman Larissa has [...] usurped my place as narrator" (T 645). Larissa could be the narrator of the narrative the master is writing, therefore his invention/object, but she could be also inventing the master. As in Diderot's story, Jacques subverts the conventional roles of master and servant, becoming in turn his master's master, as appears from a dialogue between him and his Master,

Thanks to the men from Timbuctoo it is clear that Larissa is producing a text. But which text? It looks mightily as if she were producing this one and not, as previously appeared, Armel, or Armel disguised as narrator or the narrator I disguised as Armel. That's not very clear.

No it isn't.

Of course she may be producing a different text.

She may indeed, master.

That's not very clear either.

Perhaps not.

But you see what follows from that?

Not quite yet master.

It means that the narrator I transformed into Larissa am no longer your master but your mistress.

Master! I find that most offensive. I know that we quarrelled at the inn, but I made you agree afterwards that all our quarrels were due to our not accepting the fact that although you were pleased to call yourself and I was pleased to call you the master, I am in fact yours. (T 644)

Larissa, the master, and Jacques are interchangeable narrators, in a play where the servant(s) or object(s) in turn become the master(s) or subject(s) and *vice versa*.

The concepts of subject and object, narrated and narrator, “container and contained” slide into one another. Accordingly, it is stated that “the notions of subject and object correspond only to a place in the narrative proposition and not to a difference in nature” (T 647).

The result is a “patchwork plot”, constructed through the scraps of stories and discourses of all the personae which in turn invent and get invented/reinvented amidst hypotheses and hints. It is never clear “who is who”, “who plays who”, who is narrating/inventing and who is being narrated/invented: the ever-shifting narrators-characters are in turn presented as narrating subjects and narrated objects of the narrative. A never ending negotiating process, illuminatingly presented by means of a “clockwise” table,

unless Armel inventing Larissa		
or Larissa	"	Armel
" Armel	"	Veronica
" Veronica	"	Armel
" Armel	"	Larissa
" Larissa	"	Marco (or is it Oscar?)
" Marco (?)	"	Larissa
" Larissa	"	Armel

(T 586)

Soon after, the table is not only presented in reverse, “anticlockwise”, but also ended with a question mark, so as to signify that the process can be practically endless and unpredictable.

The hypotheses on who invents whom could go on *ad infinitum* and indeed, whoever is inventing or getting invented in the novel seems to be itself a fictional character in *Thru*. In a text where no self is posited in the traditional sense of the term, narration consists of a flux of utterances coming from different, unidentifiable sources. The voices of the various discourses are heaped one upon another, in a continuous process of construction and destruction of the fictional illusion, which results in all the momentary narrators finally rendering each other unreliable.

Such a continuous and purposeful shift of focalization shakes the whole logic of narrative representation. The variations in point of view, called by Genette “changes in focalization” or “alterations”, were abhorred by post-Jamesian criticism that obliged the text to be steadily consistent in following the principle of focalization adopted. Against this norm or “rule”, Genette refers to the alterations of the focalizing point and asks, “why could this course not be absolute freedom and

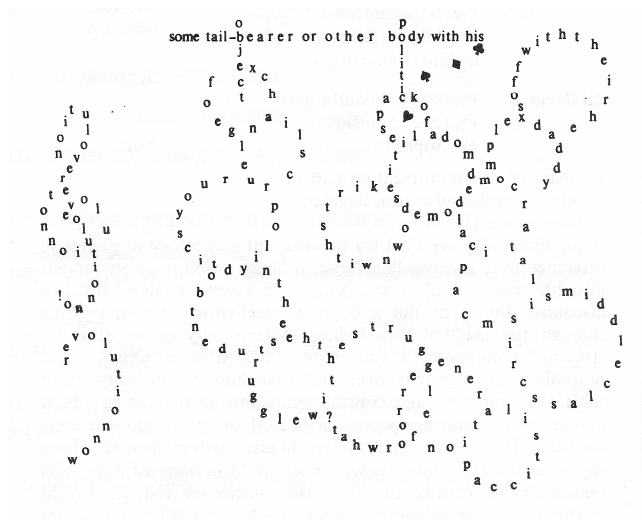
inconsistency?” (Genette 1980 195). Brooke-Rose seems to have taken up this question and gone further so as to make a resolutely constant and deliberate transgression of the rule, the rule itself. Indeed one of the teachers in the text tells the students, “Do you follow the principle? the principle being that you do not follow the principle” (T 622, 699).

Before considering the linguistic aspects of *Thru*, let us examine its most “apparent” textual characteristics. The novel in fact playfully performs its own textuality by stressing the materiality of a text which may be counted as visual literature, a text which far from presenting pictures as conventional illustrations, “itself becomes the meaningful picture” (Maack 132). It is in fact interspersed with typographical tricks which play with the readers’ visual capacity and draw their attention to the spatiality of the text. This “arrangement of non fictional text forms” (Maack 133), far from being mere materiality, becomes fiction itself. The typography of *Thru* visually represents the situation or the “object of the moment”: the stress on the textual surface is a way of playing on and enhancing the content of the text. Its situations and objects attain a multi-meaningful status by means of their material shape.

Timetables break up the layout of the page, showing the reader in a more immediate way the organization of the subjects at the university (T 599), reinventing them with a sexual twist to enhance one of the subtending themes of the text (T 668), or comparing thirteenth and twentieth century institutions of knowledge (T 679-80). In this last case, the text seems to imply that although the syllabus of cultural institutions gets reformed as time passes, under the appearance of renewal hides the same, old human nature. In fact, there is a direct relationship of correspondence between the subjects studied in the thirteenth century and those studied in the twentieth century, and we are told that the institutions of learning are “all [...] a conspicuous consumption of knowledge nobody wants” (T 682-3).

One of the tables is disposed centrally across two pages (T 682-3), cutting the four paragraphs above and below it and determining their sequence: the top left paragraph links logically with the top right one, and the bottom left paragraph follows in the bottom right one. There are many other peculiar graphic shapes, such as the wheel representing “the dance of the twenty-seven veils” (T 663), or

rectangles and triangles which are patterns throughout the novel and are drawn both with lines or with the disposition of words on the page. What seems to be concrete poetry is in fact widely employed in *Thru*: the arrangement of words for instance gives life to a chain of circles which mime the dancing hoops seen through the driving-mirror, “bouncing in out of through and through each other [...] as if juggled by a mad magician” (T 582), a metaphoric image for the play of fictional illusion,



(T 618)

A *Curriculum vitae* (T 616-7) is directly presented when the faculty meeting is considering an application for a post. Mirror writing (T 599, 609, 669), i.e. writing from right to left, is inserted in the text and, apart from playing on our visual capability, reminds us of the mirror theme. Reversed, upside-down writing (T 605), musical notations (T 619), some elements of Boolean algebra (T 699), years inserted into rectangles during a class, so as to mime the teacher writing a date on the blackboard and drawing a rectangle around it for emphasis (T 608), Chinese ideograms which seem to represent two legs (T 675, 630) or the irrelevance of a man’s love oath (T 702), empty or giant parentheses (T 607, 600), crossed text (T 598), pages to be read across and down because of their vertical and diagonal sections, are all present in *Thru*, including an excerpt from a rhetoric manual dating 1574,



Among the many typographical arrangements we also find the shape of a linguistic tree rendered in the form of concrete poetry,



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to find an order derived from structuralism and generative grammar” (Maack 134). It is not by chance therefore, that the above figure presents at its basis the word “order”. For Grant, the tree-like verbal icons “are meant to suggest lamp posts seen through the rear-view mirror of a car” (Grant 12). In my view, this image seems to represent a university amphitheatrically-shaped room, where a faculty meeting is being held, miming therefore the confusion of voices of the many participants during the meeting, each expressing their ideas while the president calls for “order”, thus at the same time providing the reader with information on what is being said and describing the arrangement of the room without recurring to a conventional description.

The typographical jokes seem sometimes to have the purpose of teasing the characters, such as when a group of revolutionary students interrupts a lesson and tries to convince everybody to join the political fight by criticising literature as “the servant of the bourgeoisie” (T 670). The slogan of the subversive students is inserted at the end of the discussion between the two groups, yet an ironic light is cast on the situation as the motto is put in musical terms,

Agitato ma non troppo

The bour-geois i-dyll is o-o-o-ver

pp<f<ff (T 672)

Brooke-Rose’s attitude towards the two parts of the linguistic sign is first of all playful: she approaches language as a material which is from the one hand graphic, as if it was touchable, from the other also playable with, funny: the long-questioned relation between signifier and signified furnishes the possibility for verbal creativity.

Humour – basic to the author’s narrative practice – is enacted in *Thru* primarily by means of a vast range of wordplays which subvert the linear relationship between signifier and signified and show how much is contained in a single word. The text delights in punning, exploiting the relationship between the semantic and the phonological values of words, inventing new terms and/or assembling/disconnecting already existing ones. For example, “amphitheatre” becomes “amphibiantheatre” (T 634), while the onomatopoetic value of words is stressed through their form, as in “wrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrruNg” (T 589). Most of the puns in *Thru* operate in the sexual field and emphasise the sexual relationships between Larissa and Armel, Larissa and

Stavro, Armel and Veronica. Already in the first pages, a sexual scene is described by means of both horizontal writing and acrostics, so that during a dialogue between a man and a woman we read their thoughts: “expected gesture well I want her cunt”, “mmmmm”, “yes Exite me”, “I’m coming”, “Go on”, “boy aRe you big” (T 588-9). Sexual insults do not lack in the text, as for instance “Nigger bastard” (T 624), “Jewish slut” (T 624), or “CUNT” (T 589) also rewritten as “cant” (T 619), both an allusion to the sexual term and to Kant’s philosophy. According to the already predominant erotic perspective of the novel, “textuality” intersects with “Sex(t)uality” (T 590, 691), “heterosexuality” becomes “heterotextuality” (T 680), intertextuality develops into “intersexuality” (T 657) or into the “sea of infratextuality [...] of flute-playing phallusies” (T 684), the text gains the status of “texture of self-love” (T 681), ecstasy becomes “textasy” (T 665), “discourse” turns out to be “disc-hoarse” (T 679), figures of speech are converted into “fig-years of speech” (T 686), and catastrophe is “castratrophie” (T 715). The days of the week acquire new names: “Sceneday, Mouthday, Toolsday, Wombsday, Circe’s Day, Aphrodite’s Day, Sated day” (T 668). The fictional “mise-en-abîme is [...] organised” (T 665) rather than organised, and the writer has to cope with a “breast-selling reality” (T 703).

Linguistic jokes in *Thru* are wide-ranging, from anagrams, such as Larissa and Armel’s names, or the fact that Larissa uses a near anagram of her name to represent herself: “I’m rotten through and through you know, my name is Toren” (T 713), to acrostics and portmanteau words, from word-ladders to the coinage of new terms. These features are to be found throughout the text and are often simultaneously present in the same paragraph, sentence or word, thus increasing the reading prospect. In the first twenty-one pages (T 579-599), the reader can detect in acrostics the hidden thought patterns of the character’s mind we are in: if speech is given horizontally on the page, thought is decipherable in vertical writing, through the initial letter of each line. Thus the text becomes an acrostic and the thought pattern we read is a peculiar kind of acronym. In the page reported below, we read Ruth (another female character) telling Armel about a dream she has had, while in vertical Armel is thinking “What is Larissa doing now or Veronica?”,

But it needs adjusting.
 Well then I found myself with a magician on a
 helluva stage as his stooge you know in tights
 and a sequin bodice and my bust like it was busting
 tight out of it and I was handing him coloured scarves
 i think and suddenly a prop was missing I forget his
 stick I mean his wand anyway it was my fault he couldn't
 Lift the white rabbit out of the hat and the crowd murmured
 and even shouted as he signalled frantically like mad
 right into the wings but they didn't get the message and
 in the end he walked off leaving me alone on stage to cope
 somehow in the glare of lights that hits the mirror and
 swings left out of it beaming ahead rewritten now
 as two small red eyes in a hunched black shape which is
 delineated against forward floodlight the retrovizor re-
 opening to the hoops dancing up and down and aside
 in the rear distance luminous horizontal ovals oh
 no, vertical ovals as if at quarter angle amber red
 green white swiftly changing shape and juggled by the
 night or by the tall dark house with blue eyes
 or maybe by the black recumbent street who
 was very short and fat for a magician more than
 obese you've never seen anything so fat he tried to
 reach the switches to calm the audience but he was so
 Very fat and short so he lifted me in my tights and bodice
 ever so firm under the breasts with them busting
 right out of the sequins and I managed to switch them
 off and as he brought me down we kissed half
 naked ever so sexy and then we started wanting
 it like crazy but I said no later we have to
 calm the crowd so he got wild and dragged me
 after him out of the theatre but I wrenched free
 saying the show must go on can you interpret
 ?

(T 587)

Thought patterns, of which many other salient examples are presented in *Thru* (Cf. T 581, 584, 588, 589), are rendered either in acrostics or in bold type. They represent a highly original way of introducing metadiegetic discourse in the text. Sometimes it is not solely the initial letter of each line which creates new meaning, but also the intersection of the letters which can be either at the beginning or in the middle of a word, so that we have a mix of acrostics and mesostics (T 597).

A palindrome is to be found in the phrase "ROMA AMOR", which the same text says must be "spelt backwards of course" (T 730), where the two words together are a palindrome, whereas each word taken in itself is a bi-frontal palindrome. A peculiar, diagonal, palindromic cross is also the word "(t)ex(i)t" (T 690), the important implications of which we will later analyse.

When a nursery rhyme is rewritten lispingly (T 585), it becomes utterly humorous as its subject is no less than Thoth, the god of writing. In the sentence

“each problem a preamble to a promble” (T 688), metathesis and alliteration mix together to generate laughter.

Another feature of linguistic creativity is represented by *portmanteau* words such as “rétro viseur” (T 579) or “tale-bearer” (T 580). The terms “goldicondeologists” (T 593) and “goldicondeology” (T 736) are newly created *portmanteau* words to render the concept of the “the golden icon ideology”, a concept which seems to be related to the psychological transfer of desire from the subject to the object, the term thus indicating a golden icon, something to be venerated as the object of desire. The word “tonguetables” (T 593) ironically recalls the tables of the commandments because immediately followed by a sentence in biblical style, “Thou shalt eat thy prisoner” (T 593). The term “Camouflashback” (T 620) is made up of the junction between flashback and camouflage, a “flashback more or less well camouflaged” (T 620). The word “foot men” (T 593) is a calque which refers to the expression “le lacquais de la bourgeoisie” (Cf. Brooke-Rose 2002b 94). The verb “ringturn up” (T 630) and many other terms are new *portmanteau* words which contribute to present the narrative events ironically. Indeed, all these terms generate metaphorical meaning within the context they are inserted, as for instance the expression “mommagirlwife” (T 731), used to convey the idea of the stereotyped woman that men look for, a woman who could substitute the mother figure but who would be at the same time a sexually appealing lover and a caring wife. Slang transcription of words is also present, as in “kinduv” (T 626) and many other instances. The pattern of the word ladder invented by Lewis Carroll is in *Thru* originally enhanced as it can be read both horizontally and vertically, intersecting with acrostics/mesostics which multiply its possible readings (T 599, 741), as well as with mirror writing and with a typography that mimes the ladder (T 741).

The language of *Thru* possesses the ability to avoid the expected and to renew itself at every sentence with a myriad of linguistic devices. It is a language that incessantly destroys and constructs meaning in order to create something new away from its conventional use, *through* language and *out of* language. One salient feature by means of which *Thru* avoids, or better destroys the expected is its peculiar doubting language. The play on the smallest unity of the syntactical chain, on the

syntagmatic axis, is overtly announced at the beginning of the novel with the formula “SIN TAG MA TRICKS” (T 581). *Thru*’s language enacts the process of concurrently constructing and destroying meaning, of “Giving and taking away at the same time” (Hayman and Cohen 19). This is attained by means of unusual doubting affirmations and negations, of sentences which affirm while denying or deny while affirming, continuously recasting their own meaning into uncertainty.

This peculiar characteristic of *Thru* clearly shows Pound’s influence on Brooke-Rose. In *A Structural Analysis of Pound’s Usura Canto*, Brooke-Rose describes the mesmerizing use of negation and affirmation in Pound: statements can be distinguished into grammatical negative and positive, as well as in evaluative pejorative or non-pejorative. She explains that Pound plays with such statements so that the evaluative-pejorative one can be expressed in positive grammatical terms and the evaluative-non pejorative one, in negative grammatical terms (Cf. Brooke-Rose 1976 12-16). The author employs the same strategy in *Thru*, enhancing it with the simultaneous employment of other linguistic features which add to the indeterminacy of its language.

If sentences can affirm, negate or doubt more or less the thing in question, if “one can tell *more* or tell *less* what one tells [...] narrative information, has its degrees” (Genette 1980 161-2), in *Thru*, rather than by means of stock grammatical negation and affirmation, different “degrees” of affirmation and negation are used to provide unconfirmed information. Conjunctions, adverbs, adjectives, nouns, verbs and question marks all contribute to this effect. The connectives *and*, *if*, *or*, *but*, are mostly used to undermine the safe state of preceding assertions. For example, on the very first page of the text, an answer is given to the question “who speaks?” (“le rétro viseur”), but the second page starts with “or”, which automatically puts into doubt what has just been said and points to alternative answers. It follows a paragraph of questions into questions, the last sentence of which is a grammatical affirmation but also a question, its last word and the question mark being displaced on the page,

or the vizir looming grey eminence behind the consultan listener how
many times leaning a little to the right to peer into how many
rectangles a thousand and one in which there is a flaw? (T 580)

Below we read “but [...] whatever [...] and who ever” (T 580), which casts further relative light on the question. The central role of *but* is highlighted on another

occasions by presenting it in bold capitals, and placing it centrally at the beginning of the page (Cf. T 582). Another extensively used conjunction is *unless*, which systematically throws hesitation on what has been just presented as happening (Cf. T 618). The adverbs *perhaps*, *however* and *yet* are employed for the same purpose and are often connected to conjunctions, other adverbs or verbs which add to their dubitative function, as for instance in “and perhaps” (T 604), in “So far however” (T 664), or in “They however seem” (T 614). *However* is extensively employed at the beginning of a paragraph to put into doubt what has been described in the preceding one (Cf. T 715). The adverb *meanwhile* – widely used to start paragraphs and change focus – seems to suspend the time of narration, to elude it, thus concurring strongly to the narrative *tempo* of the text, while participating of the question “who speaks”, since it is impossible to state who utters it. The preposition *despite* and the conjunctions *or*, *because*, and *of*, are used all together in the same sentence many times throughout the text to simultaneously hypothesise and doubt, as in the sentence, “A second pair of eyes hidden higher up the brow would have its uses despite psychic invisibility or because of” (T 583). In this last instance, the conditional verb sheds further reservation on the veritable status of the statement, whereas in another example – “These things do matter despite psychic invisibility or because of” (T 592) – a stock affirmation leads to the preposition *despite* which appear to challenge the logical connection of the main statement, which is then doubtfully reinstated as a possibility by *or because of*.

The language of *Thru* possesses the power to multiply its meanings by indicating neither their truth nor their falsehood. We are constantly presented with opposite evaluations of the same subject or with different descriptions of the same person or situation. *Thru* concurrently furnishes double possibilities, such as when we read “undipped or even gently dipped” (T 582), or else that “The moving finger [...] maintains the truth (of the falsehood) in a pregnant plenitude” (T 692). On the reciprocal invention of the characters it is said,

Armél could invent Marco or is it
Tariel and vice versa but due to the double standard
in practice would not stoop or merely would not have the curiosity. Clearly Marco does not invent Veronica nor she even
utter Marco (or is it Stavro?) [...]

On the other hand the hypotheses could have been (T 586)

The expressions “would not”, “or merely would not”, and “on the other hand” simultaneously put forward possibilities and deny them. The text is extensively constructed with sentences where an affirmation is doubted, as for instance when we read, “Only these lower eyes [...] can see, presumably, the upper eyes” (T 605), the adverb *presumably* upturning the security of the main phrase. Or again when the declaration “Surely she should be concerned” (T 609) is followed by a question which makes crumble what *surely* has just constructed. The process of giving and taking away at the same time functions within short sentences as well as entire paragraphs,

in any case the mistress of the moment should be
changed, and no doubt will be in another moment though per
haps she could meanwhile be called, Ruth, for mixed reasons
of phonemic contiguity. (T 595)

The position of the negation in the syntactical chain is something to play on to generate different nuances of meaning, to deny alternatively the verb, object, subject, adverb or adjective. An infinite play of language which can be observed when we read, “this is (not) no mystery/this is (not) my mystery/this is (not) no hystery/this is (not) my hystery/this is my story”, all of which is followed by “of the Eye” (T 584), which alludes to Bataille’s famous work but is also a play of the phonemic equality of *eye* and *I*.

As Brooke-Rose stresses again when she declares, “I’ve always tried to avoid the expected word” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 154), she incessantly tries to attain a specific choice of language away from the “expected” modes of communication. This not only contributes to the “unfamiliarity” of her language and destabilizes the “automatism” which much language suffers from – where a certain context automatically calls for a specific word – but also and most importantly produces linguistic humour, as it evades the rule of logical prospect and generates surprise and laughter.

Juxtaposition and repetition are other basic inventive resources used by the author to engender surprising metaphorical meaning and generate humour. By juxtaposing separate words or sentences, a link is created between them and a new, unexpected and metaphorical implication is generated. In this way, Brooke-Rose lays bare the power of language of being funny and unpredictable, of generating hilarity and surprising results. In *Thru*, Larissa is brought to comment on the unpredictable

possibilities that words bear when she warns Stavro, “Be careful of words [...] they are lures and have unexpected results” (T 699). Examples of juxtaposition of words in the text are innumerable, as for instance when during a sexual scene we read of the character’s “sexual humour secreted unsecretly” (T 588), where the verb to “secrete” is put side by side to the adverb “unsecretly” to create a sense of contrast within the alliteration of the words. The play on words sharing the same root is reinforced in the question “(but what does the ommitter omit?)” (T 691), where even the brackets contribute to the joke, miming the omission. The expression “the cherub revolutionary” (T 612) – used to describe one of the students in the class – is another example of the surprising effect of words, since the two terms “cherub” and “revolutionary” clash with each other, a cherub being an angel and not generally a revolutionary, perhaps suggesting that the person in question possesses typical angelic traits. The expectation of words normally calling for one another is eluded when we read “once upon a spacetime” (T 662) instead of the classical and “automatic” “once upon a time”, or when between the Latin words “*ad infinitum*” we find an uncommon term, “ad neurotic infinitum” (T 631), or again when the expected “my love” becomes “Larissa my loathing” (T 631). The possible different meanings of a single word are played on when we read about the farce of “faculty meetings where faculties never meet” (614), or else in the following example,

it’s a motet for a prepared piano.
 Ha! Sul piano umano?
 Oh, Salvo!
 Piano, piano. (608)

The effect of juxtaposition is further enhanced by repetition. When a word or sentence previously used comes back in a different context, adjacent to a different sentence or slightly varied, it suddenly gives life to something new, once more demonstrating the unforeseen and entertaining effect language can have. Already in *A Grammar of Metaphor* (1958), Brooke-Roses analyzes the endless possibilities of metaphor in language and later on she asserts, “I saw that [...] language is capable of far more subtle ways of metaphoric expression than the stock grammatical ways. You can do a lot with subliminal structures and repetition [...]. You use the same phrase in a new context and embedded in that new context it acquires a completely different meaning” (Hayman and Cohen 3).

The practice of repetition and juxtaposition clearly demonstrates Pound's influence on Brooke-Rose. In the manner of Pound's poetry, *Thru* employs juxtaposition of words and/or sentences to generate metaphorical meaning. Not only is a sentence embedded within a specific context "a form of metaphor" (Turner 1990b 22), but also – when repeated in a different situation – it will inevitably remind the reader of its previous semantic perspective, thus enriching its own metaphorical connotations. Some examples from the text will help us better appreciate the effect of repetition. For instance, in the context of a sexually alluding dialogue in a car, a man and a woman look for a parking space and their conversation on how to manoeuvre the car into it – from the spot which is "too small", all the way to "You'll have to take her out and start again" (T 590) – becomes sexually metaphorical because of the context. Later on, the phrases "you'll have to back into it" (T 603) and "you have to take her out and start again" (T 605) come back in the context of a class discussion and assume different meanings, but inevitably remind the reader of their earlier context.

Similarly, the Lacanian object of desire is referred to many times throughout the text, assuming in different contexts diverse connotations of meaning in the sexual (T 595), love/marriage (T 660), and narrative technique (T 603) fields. In yet another example, the class is asked to vote for or against the narrator's presence in the narrative and we read, "Those for. Those against. Abstention. Refusal of vote" (T 604). The same formula comes back slightly varied in the context of a quarrel between Armel and Larissa and acquires a completely different meaning: Larissa is crying and Armel does not offer his love to her, hence we read, "Abstention. Refusal of votive offering" (T 625). The sentence comes back once more to signify the man's fear and consequent refusal of love: "Those which? Those for. Those against. Abstinence is good for you. Refusal of the goddess by Eurilochus" (T 632). Likewise, during an aggressive lovers' dialogue, Larissa tells Armel "Oh go fuck yourself", to which it is ironically replied with a biblical misquotation, "The fall was into language" (T 655). The same sentence then recurs when talking about the debate on the absence and presence of signifiers in language (T 675), so as to say that language is a structure you can fall in, as well as after Stavro has asked Larissa to marry him, so that it acquires a different nuance, perhaps alluding at the fact that

Stavro has gone too far with words, “falling” into the sentence “please please marry me” (T 699).

Taking up Genette’s theory, we can see how the technical feature of repetition, considered in terms of narrative temporality, determines the “*narrative frequency*”, i.e. the relations of frequency between the narrative and the diegesis (Cf. Genette 113). However, as Genette explains, repetition is always the same yet different: if a “statement [...] can be repeated one or more times in the same text”, the identity of the repetitions is an abstraction, “materially [...] none of the occurrences is completely identical to the others” (Genette 1980 114), “the *identity* of [...] multiple occurrences is debatable: “the sun” that “rises” every morning is not exactly the same from one day to another” (Genette 1980 113). In *Thru* this concept seems to be played upon as repetition is never the same, but always slightly varied. The same sentences, stylistically varied or embedded in different contexts, multiply their connotations of meaning. Moreover, the same discourses are repeated by different characters, so that the points of view of the utterances change and therefore, once again, their connotations. *Thru* seems thus to be one of those modern texts which for Genette, “are based on narrative’s capacity for repetition” (Genette 1980 115). In respect to repetition, Genette explains that a narrative can be “singulative” (1N=1S), “anaphoric” (nN=nS), “repeating” (nN=1S), or “iterative” (1N=nS) (Cf. Genette 113-14). In *Thru*, these different modes are all present and mixed up with each other: repeated scenes and sentences occur all through the text, but their variations and/or their dissimilar contexts determine each time their uniqueness. We can have singulative scenes inserted within repeated paragraphs, iterative scenes within singulative passages, or else – to link this point with what said above *circa* the use of a specifically indefinite language – a doubting adverb is used as an iterative beginning to precede a singulative scene. We could also say that we have iterative stories each time the same thematic is addressed (the stories are different, but the narrative is the same). For instance every time the text considers love and sexual relationships between man and woman, it is always the castration complex which lies at the basis of the dynamic and determines it.

Thru achieves the always unexpected in that the new and sudden relations of meaning instituted by its peculiar use of language become metaphorical. As the

author explains, “I’ve always been fascinated by the fusions effected through metaphor and this can be done in many subterranean ways” (Turner 1990b 27).

Most importantly, repetition and juxtaposition are used to fuse together the different critical jargons the text is extensively made up of. In fact, the stories narrated in *Thru*, the relationships between the characters and the various issues the novel tackles are presented by means of a mixture of specialized discourses which has already been observed in the three preceding novels. However, in *Thru* this technique assumes emblematic significance in that the text is made up of discourses coming mainly from the French critical debate of the time: literary theories make up a fictional text.

Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, Greimas, Irigaray, Propp, Jakobson and Bakhtin are some of the critics whose theories are addressed, “dismantled” and “reconstructed” in metaphorical directions. What Brooke-Rose calls the “jargon and discourse that human beings invent to protect their discipline and to keep the outsider out” (Tredell 32), becomes metaphorical if used within a specific framework and interpreted literally. Critical discourses get juxtaposed and repeated in different contexts in order to let their original meaning acquire new connotations and their “jargonesque obscurity” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 2) *renew*. In this connection, the author reveals: “I needed to send up the structuralist jargon, also to use it as poetry, to use the very jargon of narratology as a metaphor, in a way, to deconstruct it” (Friedman and Fuchs 88).

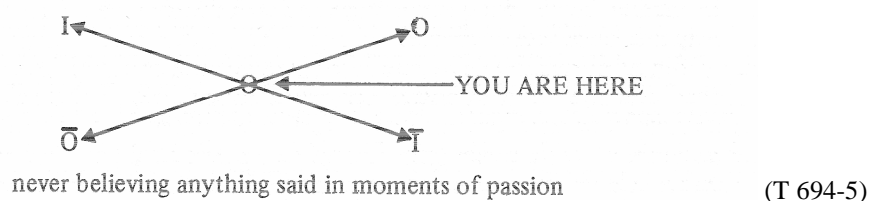
All the critical theories presented in *Thru* are integral part of the events its characters seem to experience, they blend together to build up the narrative in a humorous way. Brooke-Rose’s deep awareness of linguistics and literary theory becomes something to play with, a game, something to poke fun at.

For instance, the famous Barthesian question “Who speaks?” is repeatedly asked in the text in order to highlight and play on the impossibility to distinguish a point of view which orientates narration. Similarly, the Lacanian dialectic of desire is repeatedly used in the text to tackle the sex and love themes and delineate the relationships among the characters. Again, Barthes’ death of the author blends with the Lacanian narcissistic subject and seems to recall Eco’s criticism as we read, “the

narrator has disappeared into a pool of lethal self-love with Echo echoing on” (T 689).

After Larissa receives a marriage proposal by Stavro, the Lacanian dialectic subject/object mingles with Greimas’ semiotic square – where contrary concepts are both opposed and equivalent to each other in a direct logic of interrelation – as a way of expanding on the latent modality of desire in a love relationship,

the dialectic of desire that gravitationally pulls you towards the centre of attention she enjoys as from the start an object of central loss [...] will you stay with me always always please will you marry me. [...] the introduction, into the superficial grammar, of wanting as a modality, permits the construction of modal utterances with two actants united in a proposition, the axis of desire then authorizing a semiotic interpretation of them as virtual performer subject and an object instituted as value. Adam wants an apple Adam wants to be good. Such an acquisition, by the subject of the object, seems to occur as a reflex action, which is only a particular case of a much more general structure well known as the diagram of communication represented in its canonic form as an M and a Y of crossed limbs with diagonals from the I to the object



It is clear how critical theory becomes a way of developing the narrative. In another example of this practice, a quotation from Bakhtin is used by Larissa to oppose Armel’s denigration of Stavro,

You have no right to reify him into the voiceless object of an intellect that delimits him. A human being lives to the end on his lack of definition, he always has the last word. Read Bakhtine! Of course he’ll have the last word which will be a cowardly silence. (T 711)

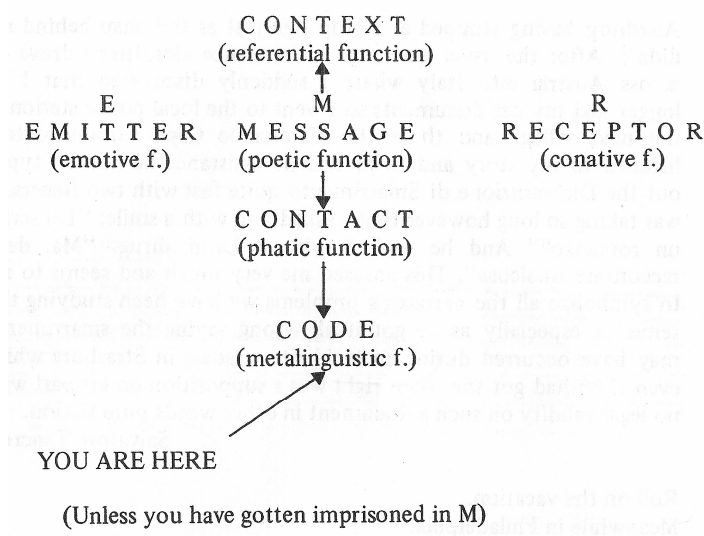
In another scene, six people sit by an open fire in a cottage and chat. Larissa’s perceptions are described by recurring to linguistics terms as she “watches, bored, the imperceptible shrug of scorn functioning like the bar between signifier and signified for ever eluded” (T 649). Again, during a class debate one of the students gets angry and starts criticising the organization of the academic syllabus in very violent terms, to which the teacher reinstates,

You are turning this place into a carnival. Well I have no objection it’s a mode of perception as Bakhtine has shown, but you should then be aware that carnival has its own structure at every level all taboos suspended all hierarchy reversed and certain very specific ineluctable processes I forebear to mention. (T 635)

Jakobson's diagram of communication is both printed on the page and variously addressed in different contexts. The teacher for example warns the students,

... we mustn't

confuse the levels of discourse. My function here is not to narrate but to teach, or shall we say I am not a function of your narrative, and we are using a metalanguage, so: [...]



The arrow pointing at the metalinguistic code while suggesting “YOU ARE HERE”, makes clear that the discourse of *Thru* is self-reflexive, it is metadiscourse, a discourse on discourse, on linguistics, literary theory and narrative practice. Soon after we read in fact, “There should be placards saying: Danger You are now entering the Metalinguistic Zone” (T 629).

Linguistic jokes humorously address the critical debate as well: the acronym “R.E.M.” which initially stands for Rapid Eye Movement (T 596), later comes to signify the relationship between Recipient, Emitter and Message: “unrapid eyes movements tampering the Message between Emitter and Recipient so that EMR→REM (REM)” (T 610-1). Likewise, the critical concept of “fallacy” is humorously played upon as it becomes “pathetic fallacy” (T 595), “bathetic fallacy” (T 626), “parent synthetic phallacy”(T 632) or else “bathetic phallucy” (T 653). Similarly, the concept of “porte-récit” (Todorov 1977) is ironically mistranslated as “tale-bearer” (a linguistic calque of the word “spokesman”) and explained while mixed with the Lacanian Other,

a tale-bearer, whose life also depends on his narration generated by the surplus value left over from the previous tale and itself generating the next. Read Todorov *les homes-récits* on this. Each I leads into another I, unless I into O for Other interruption with a point of information? (T 618)

Metalinguage, in *Thru*, is firmly lodged within the fictional world, as “it occurs as the professional discourse to [...] university lecturers in narratology” (McHale 1995 200). Literary theory becomes a way of expanding on the textual themes. Narratology becomes itself a story to be narrated. It becomes narration through its language used as a metaphor. As Minetti points out, for Brooke-Rose there could be no separation between language and metalanguage, practice and theory, language as object and language as “judging means” (Minetti 87-8). Language as object is necessarily self-reflexive. The text both reflects on and puts into practice the narrative issues it talks about, all with a humorous attitude: creating fiction while discussing the various issues related to fictionality.

As Barthes explains, “the discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity [...] The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing” (Barthes 1977 164). The text refers to itself, concentrating on its own strategies and elements. The textual practice of self-reflexivity is indeed introduced by the very first image of the novel: “Through the driving-mirror four eyes stare back” (T 579), two of them are real, the other two are generated by an optical illusion. As Berressem explains, this double reflection “occurs when the *frontal* as well as the *rear* plane of a tick mirror both send back a reflection” (Berressem 133). The condition of a gaze looking at itself and receiving back its own stare exemplifies the process of the text reflecting itself, whereby the formula “A text is a text is a text” (T 635), which can stand for both the self-referential nature of the novel and its intertextuality.

What the mirror sends back is a double effect of reality: four eyes instead of two, and since we are immediately told that two eyes are fictitious, “eXact replicas” of the other two, we feel our perception, our confidence in realistic representation is being undermined: the work of fiction refers to its own illusion, we are embarking on a voyage into a fictive universe. As Brooke-Rose elucidates, *Thru* “is not about the writing of fiction [...] it’s about the fictionality of fiction: the fact that these characters are just letters on a page” (Hayman and Cohen 4). The idea of staring at the rear-mirror symbolises the idea of looking at the illusion of narration, of literary

creation. In this way, the text playfully inscribes itself into the debate over language and representation, over the “reality” language can represent. The fictional illusion is emphasised, constantly built up and destroyed, the voices of the discourses are placed one upon another, disintegrating each other, rendering each other unreliable, constantly creating and breaking up the fictional illusion.

Another implication of the process of looking at the mirror is “the paradox [...] of a look directed forwards but that perceives what is behind” (Maack 133). This initiates the practice of intertextuality, the movement of the text mirroring both itself and what is behind, i.e. other texts. Language becomes the subject which mirrors itself (self-referentiality) but which is also related to its previous literary uses.

Thru addressed the whole textual tradition and locates itself in its chain, which goes from Cervantes to Rabelais, from The Bible to Beckett, from e. e. cummings to David the psalmist, from Scheherazade to *I Promessi Sposi*, from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* to Diderot’s *Jacques*, T. S. Eliot, Dante, Shakespeare, E. M. Forster, Wallace Stevens and so on. The oral tradition of lullabies, popular songs and sayings are also present in the text as part of the intertext *Thru* stems from and refers to.

Literary echoes and quotations – spread all over the novel – are employed by the characters in their conversations to express their feelings or comment on the situations presented. References are often structured as an endless *regressus ad infinitum*: “Within each text is another text, within each myth another myth” (T 608), like a “show within the show” (T 587), like “doors opening on doors, mirrors on mirrors in an eternal game of vinciperdi” (T 716). The process can be summarized in the pseudo-formula, “F(bo(lo(bo(lo(books)oks)oks)oks)oks)n” (T 684), reinstated as “Books within books, looks within looks, looks within books, books within looks” (T 678), or in the principle of “Once upon a time laid out in rectangles into which you enter as into a room saying once upon a time” (T 605), a play on the classical beginning of a fairy tale which infinitely leads onto other tales.

Thru is constructed through texts and subtexts, since “No text just comes out ex nihilo, it always comes out of other texts” (Tredell 34). Each book is in communication with all preceding books, each book looks back, like in a rear-mirror, for its predecessors, it must confront its antecedents, as a book is the result of the history of culture and narration and cannot elude what came before. To look back is

absolutely necessary to go forward, just like looking back in the rear-mirror of the car is essential to drive safely. In *Thru* indeed, we read that the “text within the text [...] generates another text” (T 631), and that the new solution generated is “a text which in effect is a dialogue with all preceding texts” (T 621).

Like Barthes’ “inter-text”, *Thru* embodies “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text” (Barthes 1975 36), referring to other texts *ad infinitum*, in a never-ending movement of circular intertextuality, and becoming “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash [...] a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 1977 146). In a text where one of the characters states “we’ve used almost everything from Phaedrus to Freud” (T 653), a lover’s request of staying for the night is preceded by a mix of discourses taken from Genette, Barthes, Jakobson and Diderot,

within the grammar of that narrative the roles can be interchanged and textasy multiplied until punctually at a fixed hour all the forged orgy ceases. For the deep structure of I am your slave is undoubtedly you will be mine and yet there is no transformational rule in any grammar which explicitly effects this since it is written up there that all deletions, reflexivisations dative movements object-raising and other transformations be recoverable so that here it is merely a question of conjugality which comes under the lexicon and the morphophonemic rules as for example in please don’t go Armel it’s so nice having breakfast together. (T 665)

Another salient example of such a mix of discourses is to be found when we read, “Che vuoi? [...] Votre demande is not an askable question. Veuillez appeler ultérieurement. Freud Freud why persecutest thou/me” (T 675). Lacan’s question is here followed by the typical answer of a busy telephone line, as well as by a biblical quotation. The question Christ asks Saul (Saul 27:7, 26:14) is now directed to Freud. The bar between “thou” and “me” recalls the Saussurean distinction between signifier/signified, as well as the Lacanian one between subject/object. Elsewhere, the characters’ names become the cause for an excursus on the meaning and role of proper names in literature. The passage touches on Barthes and Propp and ends up with a direct question to Jacques the fatalist,

I should have stuck to pronouns as in late twentieth century texts which refuse biographies since a name must have a civic status [...] That’s the rule. Written up there. In the grammar of narrative. Like attributes—states, properties and statuses. Iterative as opposed to actions. But any agent can enter into relationship with any predicate [...] no need to talk like Propp et al of hero villain lawbearer these are predicates. The agent is not the one who can accomplish this or that action but the one who can become subject of a predicate [...] So there have to be proper names after all, Jacques, Jacques why are you asleep? (T 647)

In a similar way, the dialectic of desire becomes the topic of discussion between Jacques and his master (Cf. T 595). Another time, Barthes' death of the author is readdressed and mixed with the mistranslation of Todorov's *porte-récit* and a quotation from Lewis Carroll's Queen of Hearts: "There's no more private property in writing, the author is dead, the spokesman, the porte-parole, the tale-bearer, off with his head" (T 607).

If, as Maack explains, "the innovators [...] refer explicitly to the literary tradition and carry on an intense dialogue between texts" (Maack 130), *Thru* can be said to represent a step forward in this light, in that while inscribing itself in the chain of intertextuality through endless allusions and quotations from other books, it never fails to *renew* them in its own way, to magisterially blend and repeat them in different contexts and/or order to let them gain new meaning: a new text, a new solution is created out of the old pre-existing ones.

Moreover, most of the quotations in the text are not explicitly acknowledged. The process of "quoting without quotation marks" is posited by Barthes as one of the characteristic features of a plural text. In this way, the novel "subverts the opposition between true and false", for if it fails to attribute quotations, it "flouts all respect for origin, paternity, propriety, [and] destroys the voice which could give the text its ('organic') unity" (Barthes 1974 44). Writing "has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins" (Barthes 1977 146). *Thru* becomes a "*network*" (Barthes 1977 161) of irretraceable quotations as "the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*" (Barthes 1977 160).

However, all the "sources" of *Thru* are humorously and concurrently declared towards the end of the novel. In fact, in the few last but one pages, all the dramatis personae mentioned or hinted at in the course of the novel are grouped together in a long list which awards them "degrees of presence" in alphabetical order, from Adam to Barthes, from Circe to Eros, Derrida, Genette, Greimas, God, Irigaray, Kristeva, Milton, the Phallusman, Propp, de Saussure, Scheherezade, the Text itself and the Textivores, Thanatos, Queen Victoria and poor Yorick, to mention but a few. The listing is put together by the students after a class and the personages are given marks, "degrees of presence", on the basis of the incidence of their presence in the

novel, so for instance Socrates receives a β - and the overhead projector (used by the teacher in class) a γ -. This is an exemplary ending for such a text: an inventory of “sem(id)iotic irrecoverable narrators” (T 737) almost presented as actors on a casting list. Significantly, when Brooke-Rose is asked whether she agrees to call *Thru* “a kind of proto-novel”, the author replies,

For *Thru*, certainly. It is consciously intertextual and there are lots of quotations that people haven’t picked up. At the end, I have this phony index. No-one’s understood that, but it’s actually a list of every author I quote in the book, but without page-references [...] and so authors are given alpha minuses and beta pluses and so on. I had to ask certain permissions when they were alive – everyone laughed [...] So it’s a joke [...] but it’s also an index. If anyone wants to chase up every time I quote something, it’s all there. (Tredell 34)

The question of the varying degrees of presence hinted at many times throughout the text and playfully addressed here not only creates a pun, since the term “degree” means both “level” and “academic degree”, but also ironically alludes to Genette’s theory on the posture of the narrator who can be either present or absent from the story. As he points out, “Absence is absolute, but presence has degrees” (Genette 1980 245). This linguistic joke also exemplifies the “untranslatability” of certain words and structures, since it would not make sense if translated into another language.

What we gather from the reference to Genette is that the narrators of *Thru* are not absent, it is rather their degree of presence which shifts constantly according to the subversive principle considered above (“the principle being that you do not follow the principle”).

The same “non-principle” seems to have been adopted in structuring the different and always reversible narrative levels of *Thru*. In fact, if metalepsis is conventionally carried on by the narrating, introducing a story within another story by means of discourse, in *Thru* this process is perpetually transgressed: not only do its continuous metalepses occur without any formal narrating instance introducing them, but also and most importantly they become one of the textual structuring principles. Its characters appear in different stories – each of them is in turn narrator and narrated – and the hierarchy of narrative levels collapses in absolute reversibility.

It is significant to note how three of the main subtexts of *Thru*, namely the *Thousand and One Nights*, *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le Fataliste*, are metadiegetic narratives *par excellence*. If in the *Thousand and One Nights* each story

stands at a higher narrative level than the preceding one, up to the point of a fifth degree narration,¹² *Thru* develops this technique and blurs it *ad infinitum*, constantly transgressing and mixing the narrative levels to the point that it is impossible to distinguish them. The transgression of levels – which for Genette represents a challenge to the boundary of the narrating, an overstepping of the border between two worlds, “in defiance of verisimilitude”, a trespassing of the “sacred frontier between [...] the world in which one tells [and] the world of which one tells” (Genette 1980 236) – goes in *Thru* beyond the infringing of frontiers: the borders between the levels are completely abolished.

To complicate this situation further is the rigorous use of the present tense, owing to which the time of story and that of narrating coincide: the narrating is the *here and now* of the story. The nature of instantaneous narrative at all levels precludes any precise determination of the narrative instance: all the metadiegetic levels are put on the same time-plateau. The stories are embedded into other stories without in a sense ever transgressing their *only* level. All the stories seem to exist “at the same level, simply by digression, without any shift in the narrating instance” (Genette 1980 214). Stories within stories multiply *ad infinitum* the levels of narration, yet everything is “reduced” to one plateau: a single, immense narrative. It needs be said, however, that the continuous and purposeful transgression of levels is itself systematically overdetermined and, if it were not so, it would be almost impossible to follow the endless practice of stories within stories and transgressions of narrators from one level to the others.

In the following chapters, we will consider the several theoretical implications to which Brooke-Rose’s narrative technique is inextricably linked. In the interim, I hope I have succeeded in comprehensively describing *Thru*’s highly innovative narrative practice, as well as in conveying the idea of how the author’s attitude towards language is both serious and humorous. Being a critic and a writer, her deep understanding of how language functions is employed to inscribe her text into the critical debate of the time, but by means of linguistic humour.

¹² As Todorov explains in the case of the story of the bloody chest, “Scheherazade tells that Jaafer tells that the tailor tells that the barber tells that his brother tells that... The last story is a story to the fifth degree” (Todorov 71).

The text's graphical display, its collage of wordplays, juxtapositions, repetitions, different jargons metaphorically employed and its peculiarly doubting syntax, have the effect of disorienting the reader, who moves through an apparently randomly chaotic text, where everything is continually built up and dismantled only by means of language(s).

However, the large number of different "compositional-stylistic unities" (Bakhtin 262) which the novel mixes together and which shape both its textual form (its "textuality" or printed materiality), and its content (its issues and themes), eventually determine its strength and dynamism, its narrative originality. The apparently labyrinthical chaos of *Thru* ultimately possesses its own coherence. The text achieves an immensely *complex harmony* which constitutes its unity. *Thru* is in fact, as it defines itself, "a very subtly planned chaos" (T 592).

Chapter 5

Narrative anxiety subverted: rehandling the signifiers into a delicious discourse to find an exit *Thru* the text

Having examined *Thru*'s peculiar narrative technique(s), we will now consider it in light of the critical debate of the time, thus showing how Brooke-Rose not only addresses, but also develops many of its speculations in her fictional practice.

Thru's mixture of discourses – which come both from the critical debate of the time and from the entire corpus of preceding literary production – enacts that “dialogization” of heteroglossia which for Bakhtin is the fundamental distinctive feature of the novel. In Brooke-Rose's text in fact, different languages lose their specificity of closed systems and, merging together, they get deformed, giving shape to a dialogue of languages. Stretching across theories, *Thru* plays on their mixture and their “dialogue” which results in interdisciplinary and parodying discourse, a “collage” which aims at subverting those very discourses it is made of. The novel thus presents dialogization as parody, “verbal masquerade” (Bakhtin 275), as a polemical tool toward the “linguistic unity” of the “official language”.

However, for Bakhtin the language of the novel is social and a different order from poetry: the novelist welcomes heteroglossia in his work, he “does not purge words of intentions and tones that are alien to him, he does not destroy the seeds of social heteroglossia embedded in words” (Bakhtin 299), whereas the poet possesses complete hegemony over the language he uses and subordinates it to his specific purposes, stripping “the word[s] of other's intentions”, making them lose “their link with concrete intentional levels of language and [...] with specific contexts” (Bakhtin 297).

In this light, Brooke-Rose's narrative practice not only parallels, but also develops Bakhtin's theory, as it seems to simultaneously retain the quality of welcoming heteroglossia and surpassing it, exploding heteroglossia towards poetical directions. Brooke-Rose adopts in fact what the text itself defines as a “transformational approach” (T 714) towards its blend of discourses, in that while employing endless allusions and quotations from the literary debate and from other fictional texts for the construction of the narrative, she never fails to *renew* them, magisterially distorting and blending discourses and references by means of

juxtaposition and repetition in order to let new, metaphorical relations of meaning emerge among them.

Using the distinction between deep and surface structure, we could say that in the case of such a literal use of specific jargons, the surface structure is that of the critical theory, whereas the metaphor is created at the level of the deep structure. This practice once again reminds us of Pound's dynamic subliminal structures, where the metaphor is created at the level of the deep structure, whilst the surface structure is not metaphoric. Brooke-Rose thus succeeds in creating the same tension which she admires in Pound's poetry.

As already observed, *Thru* plays on the context of utterance to shape multiplicity of meaning. For Bakhtin, each specific word bears connotations which influence the context of discourse, whereas the context has influence on the utterance as it "can refract, add to, or, in some cases, even subtract from the amount and kind of meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived only as a systematic manifestation independent of context" (Bakhtin xx). Brooke-Rose's work further develops Bakhtin's theory, as the text plays on *unusual* contexts to "add" or "refract" meaning to specific utterances in ironical and multi-meaningful directions. The same word or sentence, repeated in a different context, acquires altered connotations of meaning, while different sentences replacing each other in the same context affect the meaning of the context and suddenly institute new semantic prospects. The repeated idea of "texts within texts" and "boxes within boxes", apart from referring to the practice of intertextuality, can be seen as an endless "discovering" or "creation" of new meanings from other ones.

It is both the "system of a *unitary language*" (Bakhtin 269), the language "as ideologically saturated, language as a world view" (Bakhtin 271) and the centrifugal forces of stratification, the different socio-ideological languages which *Thru* rehandles, "alter[ing] the signifiers into a delirious discourse" (T 711) and subverting the struggle of heteroglossia. It is the very idea of the "immense plurality of experience" (Bakhtin xx) which Brooke-Rose develops to extremes by playing with disparate discourses and reshaping them continuously.

Bakhtin defines "hybridisation" as a "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter [...] between two different linguistic

consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (Bakhtin 358). *Thru* multiplies *ad infinitum* the dialogic orientation of words and brings hybridisation to extreme consequences. In *Thru*, a great variety of different discourses merge together: innumerable intertextual reminders from disparate epochs and cultures are inextricably mixed together, as well as with different languages, puns, and newly-created words. This peculiar mix, gives life to a “collage narrative”, where each discourse loses its specificity (the significance it possessed in its text of origin) to acquire new connotations of meaning. Aware of the fact that “language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents” (Bakhtin 293), Brooke-Rose seems to adopt a *force strategy* to *take over* heteroglossia: through the complete blend of discourses and through the continuous choice of the multi-directed word, all the socially and culturally charged discourses *Thru* makes use of get remoulded within the fictional tissue and offer the possibility of discovering at each reading a range of new interpretations and combinations. *Thru*’s dialogization proliferates ceaselessly and explodes the seeds of heteroglossia, as different languages lose their specificity and develop into metaphor, giving life to a text where language becomes individual and attains the status of poetry. While outrunning Bakhtin’s speculations, *Thru*’s poetical charge already points towards Kristeva’s innovative theories.

In conceiving her theory Kristeva starts from Lacan, for whom the unconscious – “structured like a language” – holds what has been repressed from consciousness and therefore linguistic gaps are the manifestation of the unconscious psychic life and the “discourse in an analytic session is valuable only in so far as it stumbles or is interrupted” (Lacan 1989 299), revealing the realm of Imaginary which conscious psychic life normally suppresses in order not to fall into schizophrenia. Kristeva, however, displaces Lacan’s notions of Imaginary and Symbolic into the Semiotic – the bodily drives and their articulation as they are discharged in signification and give life to non-referential meaning – and the Symbolic – society, culture, the grammar and structure of signification which produce referential meaning – and surpasses Lacan in that she conceives the Semiotic and the Symbolic as two inseparable modalities of signification, *both* necessary and constitutive of the signifying process, thus seeing that the transgression of the symbolic does not

necessarily entail schizophrenia. The semiotic continually makes itself manifest in language as a breach into the symbolic: such an irruption of the instinctual, that which precedes meaning and signification, into the realm of the symbolic, such a “drive heterogeneity” is all-encompassing in fantasies as well as in poetic language. Poetic language is thus a “plural, heterogeneous, and contradictory process of signification” (Kristeva 1984 88), one which encompasses both structure and transgression, and where the first is continually challenged by the second.

In this light, the language of *Thru*, with its linguistic jokes and inventions, dreams (Cf. T 722), slips of the tongue, and continuous interruptions, can be seen as the expression of the gaps of the unconscious and therefore – in Kristeva’s terms – as a breaching of the semiotic into the symbolic. In the same line, if Kristeva explains that “All poetic ‘distortions’ of the signifying chain and the structure of signification may be considered in this light: they yield under the attack of [...] those drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublate” (Kristeva 1984 49), in *Thru* the sudden changes of discourse, the interruptions, and the sentences leading from one “place” to another without any apparent logical consequentiality, can be all seen as the movement of an unconscious discourse. The poetical value of Brooke-Rose’s novel derives not only from its syntax which disrupts the logic of discourse and from its wordplays which stress the signifier and its multiplicity of connotations, but also from its different jargons which get reworked through juxtaposition and repetition and acquire metaphorical meaning. The poetical charge of *Thru*’s multiple fusion of discourses is underlined by one the teachers on various occasions,

you’ve done linguistics haven’t you no well you must every poet must it’s wildly poetic, the binary polarity in any field phonic or semic [...] white versus black or white versus non-white. But that’s logic it’s as old as Socrates it comes in the Protagoras. (T 661)

No of course I am not a structuralist I never have been I merely played with it besides one has to pass through it to understand modern linguistics. Generative grammar’s the thing it’s the grammar of the universe and it’s wildly poetic why they have rules called it-deletion and psych-movement subject-raising and object-raising and head-noun-chopping can you imagine the object of central loss being raised read Hegel on *Aufhebung* it becomes wildly funny. (T 662-3)

In addition, the non-verbal signifying systems the novel presents can be said to be entirely constructed on the semiotic modality: both the graphical arrangements and the musical notation – together with the musical rhythm determined by lullabies and popular songs – can be seen as a pure semiotic presence inscribed in the text. The language of *Thru* exemplifies the poetic language Kristeva theorised as in it the

semiotic continually irrupts into the symbolic and counters it, giving life to “a signifying practice which, although produced in language, is only intelligible *through* it” (Kristeva 1984 15), a practice which counters formalist structures and attests to the limits of ideological constructs for the interpretation of the text. The accent put by Kristeva on the term *through*, which she emphasises in italics, reveals another connotation of meaning of the novel’s title: language can only be understood *through* it, with a sort of transversal movement which exceeds any formalist analysis. There is always something which goes beyond interpretation and can be only “felt” through poetic language.

Poetic language transgresses the symbolic, the order and the law of society. In it, “the *positing* of the symbolic [...] finds itself subverted”, in that it “attacks not only denotation (the positing of the object) but meaning (the positing of the enunciating subject) as well” (Kristeva 1984 57, 58). Such a use of language shows that the hierarchical relationship between signifier and signified is an abstraction. Unity is subverted and multiple meanings arise, *from two onwards*. Any procedure based on a systematic axiom of definition, unity, identity, zero-one sequence, true-false opposition, cannot formalize poetic language and experiences a crisis when facing it. Poetic language can be grasped only by entering its *zero-two* logic, where the *one* of dogmatic definition and the law is subverted. In this way, the poetic word exceeds the discourse of institutionalized culture, shakes the border between “true” and “false”, undermines meaning, it is “polyvalent and multi-determined” (Kristeva 1980a 65), it breaks through the logic of grammar and semantic and in challenging the official linguistic logic, it challenges the structure of society. The text itself indeed stresses the significance and role of the pun, defining it as “free, anarchic, a powerful instrument to explode the civilization of the sign and all its stable, reassuring definitions, to open up its static, monstrous logic of expectation into a different dialectic with the reader” (T 607).

Poetic language does not permit identification with one single meaning, it always escapes the definition of one unique truth and offers multiple connotations and interpretative possibilities: truth does not exist, the paradigm of language *jumps* from zero to two, “the notion of definition, determination, the sign ‘=’ and the very concept of sign, which presupposes a vertical (hierarchical) division between

signifier and signified, cannot be applied to poetic language – by definition an infinity of pairings and combinations” (Kristeva 1980a 69). Kristeva relates this notion to Saussure’s “poetic *paragram*” (qtd. in Kristeva 1980a 69), the anagrams which link directly zero to two, jumping over the one of unity and definition, which is revealing in light of Brooke-Rose’s use of anagrams in *Thru*.

The dialogical language of the novel becomes, in Barthes’ words, a writing which “ceaselessly posits meaning to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning [and which], by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law” (Barthes 1977 147). In this way, Brooke-Rose’s work challenges and subverts – in line with Derrida’s deconstruction – the supposed transparent relation of meaning and thing represented between signifier and signified, i.e. the metaphysical notion of being as “self-presence of the subject” (Derrida 1976 12), for which meaning is instituted once and for all. In “the play of signifying references that constitute language” (Derrida 1976 7), meaning is endlessly deferred in time and differed in space, never present. Language bears no ultimate meaning since, as *Thru* reinstates: “reality [...] merely seeks to appear true [...] the signifier of signifiers beneath which the truth escapes” (T 727). For Derrida, each sign always refers to other signs *ad infinitum*, in a process where no ultimate referent or foundation can be established: the deferral of meaning ensures that meaning, escaping any individual attempt at control, can never be definitively present. Meaning is ultimately undecidable and the absence of the transcendental signifier permits an infinite play: “one must think of writing as a game within language” (Derrida 1976 50). In *Thru*, to offer multiple meanings are first of all aporias such as paradox, ambiguity and contradiction. By means of its own indeterminacy, the language of *Thru* breaks down the logic of the sign and produces a proliferation, a dissemination of meaning: each discourse offers innumerable reading prospects: meaning is always (*at least*) double, interpretation is at the basis of understanding.

Permitting an infinity of interpretations and combination and therefore exceeding *unity*, Brooke-Rose’s use of language perfectly illustrates Kristeva’s

declaration that “There is no limit to what can be said in the text” (Kristeva 1984 209). *Thru* becomes a dialogic, revolutionary, polyphonic novel where discourse reads itself, enters into dialogue with itself and “constructs itself through a process of destructive genesis”, a text where “two texts meet, contradict, and relativize each other” (Kristeva 1980a 77, 78), thus subverting binarism, destroying the order of the law, the 0-1 logic (the Aristotelian logic of the excluded middle on which the binarism of Western society is based), God, the authority, the univocal and dogmatic structure of society. It is a parodying, carnivalesque text, whose references to the chansons des troubadours, to anecdotes and popular tales, become significant intertextual reminders which concur to put *Thru* in line with the tradition of carnival. In fact, as Kristeva explains, carnivalesque structures persist in our days as a substratum of the official culture, in popular narratives, “in folk games as well as in Medieval theater and prose” (Kristeva 1980a 78).

Carnival discourse is not a relativizing practice where “everything goes”, but follows a law which displaces the zero-one logic. It operates within this disrupting logic and evades the rule of monological structures. Transgression does not act *without a law*, but rather it acts outside the monolithic zero-one law and gives itself a law *other*: “Dialogism is not ‘freedom to say everything,’ it is a *dramatic* ‘banter’ [...] an *other* imperative than that of 0 [...] a *transgression giving itself a law*” (Kristeva 1980a 71). In this light, Larissa’s already cited statement – “the principle being that you do not follow the principle” (T 622, 699) – acquires salient connotations.

In the “polyphonic novel”, the word becomes “ambivalent”, in that it both retains the connotations of meaning it already had and assumes new ones: it is “a word with two significations [...] the result of a joining of two systems” (Kristeva 1980a 73). Such a word, far from being merely imitated, is repeated with relativization of meaning and becomes either re-appropriation (the writer uses it for his own discourse in context), parody (the new signification the word acquires is opposite to its old one), or modification (the other meaning of the word modifies the discourse). This is exactly what happens in *Thru* when the text repeats and blends discourses together, making them both echo their original signification and acquire new metaphorical and (most often) humorous connotations.

In this light, *Thru* becomes also a text which produces bliss, i.e. one “where the death of language is glimpsed” (Barthes 1975 6), where the canonical and subversive edges of language coexist, as what bestows eroticism on the text is neither traditional culture nor its annihilation, but rather “the seam between them, the fault, the flaw” (Barthes 1975 7).

The moment of the text as *signifying practice* coincides with the very “moment of the struggle exploding the subject” (Kristeva 1984 211). The experience of the text “dissolves the subject’s compactness and self-presence” (Kristeva 1984 203) as it puts the subject in conflict with the object “represented”. The subject of this practice experiences rejection, heterogeneous contradiction: an infinite, dialectical movement arises within the pulverized subject on trial, “what takes place is the struggle with the strictly subjective thesis, with the One, as well as with all [...] systematicities” (Kristeva 1984 204). The very moment of struggle is the moment of renewal of the subject, which produces “the ‘appearance’ of this ‘new’ object”: “*At the place of this struggle, the ‘appearance’ does not exist; its ‘moment’ is ‘fiction,’ or even ‘laughter’*” (Kristeva 1984 204).

This is a crucial point for our analysis: the stress on the terms *fiction* and *laughter* makes us understand in yet a different light the “fictionality of fiction” and the humour which Brooke-Rose has always stressed when talking about her narrative. Fiction and laughter set out the moment of heterogeneous contradiction, by means of which the subject is brought to renew itself in the practice of a text. “In this moment [...] the subject breaks through his unifying enclosure and, through a leap (laughter? fiction?), passes into the process of social change that moves through him” (Kristeva 1984 205).

The subject and the object are reconstituted anew by a movement of drive rejection against contradiction, which ends up with the dismissal of all stasis. The moment of rejection produces revolution, revolutionary discourse, and corresponds to the death drive and therefore *jouissance*: “the text [...] constitutes [...] *jouissance* through language” (Kristeva 1984 210).

Brooke-Rose’s novel is thus “a practice that pulverizes unity [...] a process that posits and displaces theses” (Kristeva 1984 208), the experience of which results in a

struggle which dissolves the bond between subject and society, creating the conditions for renewal.

The renewal of the subject, Kristeva explains, is also dependent on the lack of personified transference. This implied absence prevents the discourse from becoming (in contrast to analytic discourse) the site where the subject identifies itself with a focal point: “To hamper transference, the text’s analysis must produce the certainty that the analyst’s place is empty, that ‘he’ is dead, and that rejection can only attack signifying structures” (Kristeva 1984 209). The lack of transference relation “allows the text to operate in a much wider signifying field than it otherwise would, and to carry out much more radical subversions, which, far from stopping at desire, involve the subject’s very jouissance” (Kristeva 1984 209). In *Thru*, the famous question “Who Speaks?” and the many references to the dead author (which we will consider at length in the following chapter), clearly indicate the absence of the analysand, so that the empty place of the author hampers transference and puts the subject on trial, starting the movement of contradiction which will bring renewal and allowing the text to become the site of this process.

The dialogical nature of *Thru* concurrently calls into question the concept of intertextuality. In this connection, the essay “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1969) is formative in understanding the way Brooke-Rose appropriates Kristeva’s theses and elaborates them in her text. Kristeva starts here from the definition of “word” and “dialogism”. Rather than retaining fixed, pre-determined meaning, a literary word is “an intersection of textual surfaces” (Kristeva 1980a 65), the result of a dialogue between writing subject, addressee and the cultural context it refers to: “The word’s status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus” (Kristeva 1980a 66). The word becomes the centre of dialogism and inter-textuality: “dialogism identifies writing as [...] intertextuality” (Kristeva 1980a 68).

A dialogic novel is intertextual in that the text inserts itself into the chain of “exterior” texts and the chain of texts is inserted within the text. Writing is “a reading of the anterior literary corpus and the text [...] an absorption of and a reply to another text” (Kristeva 1980a 69). If “any text is constructed as a mosaic of

quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980a 65), then its understanding must pass through the understanding of its intertextual relationships, its constant dialogue with the preceding literary corpus it refers to and stems from, in an ethic of both affirmation and negation.

Intertextuality as a subversive strategy becomes in fact the very structuring principle of *Thru*. It is subversive in that it opens up a dialogue between the discourses of the critical debate of the time and the present text, reshaping those theories into metaphor. It becomes however the more subversive as it inserts those discourses into the wider chain of the *entire culture* and its *fictional* production. In point of fact, the endless network of quotations, the texts and subtexts *Thru* is made up of are both the “real” critical texts of narratology and the fictional texts of literature.

By referring simultaneously to the preceding fictional texts and to the contemporary corpus of critical theories, *Thru* becomes the centre of dialogism and intertextuality, inscribing itself at the intersection of two axes: horizontally it belongs to writing subject and addressee and refers to a specific cultural context, vertically, it refers to the whole amount of preceding literary works (Cf. Kristeva 1980 65). As a dialogic text, its discourse involves the totality of relationships between the individual, the unconscious and culture, in a movement of confrontation and appropriation which becomes destruction and construction, “productive violence” (Kristeva 1984 16), both revolution and *jouissance*.

What is more, blending together preceding *fictional* texts and contemporary theoretical (*real*) texts, and inserting the whole amount of their discourses into the broader “text” of our culture, *Thru* perfectly illustrates Derrida’s concept that “There is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida 1976 158), that *everything is text*, that the “text” is what is broadly inscribed within culture and society, what is both outside and inside of the text as traditionally conceived. This very notion is indeed taken up in *Thru* and re-worked into several instances: we read of “a text like the human body or society” (T 685), “a text like love and three beautiful illegitimate children” (T 660), or again “a text like the world or the human body that merely engenders itself in to writing” (T 592-3). The entire culture becomes a *text*, a liminal space between

the binary oppositions which produces endless proliferation of meaning and possible interpretations.

Clearly stating that “anyone has a right to subvert any text with any other” (T 643), and positing “textuality as subversion of society” (T 670), *Thru* sets about “lighting up the commonplaces from the other place to generate a text” (T 722), laying bare the system of binary oppositions which supersedes our culture: “white versus non-white [...] it’s as old as Socrates” (T 661), “the war between man and woman, day and night, the city and the tomb” (T 678), “the potion and the holy grail the pen and the paper” (T 687). In sexual relationships, binary oppositions show the double standard: female adultery is “non-prescribed”, whereas male adultery is “non-forbidden” (T 661), “the double standard is rampant everywhere one is amazed” (T 636). By showing the underlying binarism at the heart of each of these “stories”, and by presenting critical theories as stories themselves, their status of illusion is laid bare. If everything is text, everything is a fiction, a trope which can be subverted to show the basic illusion which generates it: love, family, history, society, politics, religion, literary and psychological theories are all “stories” to be narrated, life is made up of stories, “narration is life”.

The process of juxtaposition – which *Thru* utilizes as one of its basic methods to let metaphorical meaning emerge – assumes a basic role in light of Derrida’s theory which posits it as the second step of its deconstructive approach. If each text bears in itself other texts *ad infinitum*, by means of juxtaposition, *Thru* lays bare the text within the text and produces subversion, accomplishing the deconstructive process and becoming a “blue lacuna of learning and unlearning a text within a text” (T 585).

A perfect illustration of the fusion of real and fictive texts is the peculiar bibliography which lists on the same footing both real and fictive personalities, See Bibliography*.

*retrogradiens

Wallace Stevens John Dryden Umberto Eco Daniel Defoe Sigmund Freud Moses Ezra Pound Wallace Stevens T.S. Eliot (or Guido Cavalcanti) Dante Alighieri Alexander Pope William Shakespeare Saroja Chaitwantee S. Eliot Snoopy Hegel Ali Nourennin and the occidental discourse of Westerns.

**retroprogradiens

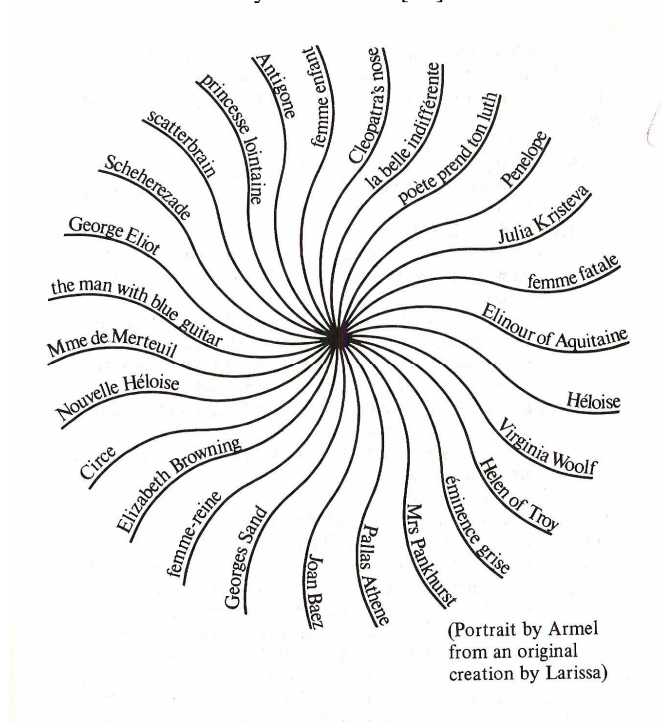
The retrovizor 1001 Nights Ezra Pound Lewis Carroll Robert Burns Lewis Carroll Robert Graves Louis Hjelmslev Ali Nourennin Paul Stradiver oh her Georges Bataille William Shakespeare Jacques Derrida A.J. Greimas Noam Chomsky Plato Ezra Pound the voters Ruth Veronica his reflection Diderot Roland Barthes Edward Fitzgerald Francis Bacon Sophocles W.K. Wimsatt Robert Greene

Daniel Defoe Moses Wallace Stevens Sigmund Freud Wallace Stevens the folk Barbra Streisand Jesus Christ Frank Kermode Jacques Lacan Denis Diderot the institution Ezra Pound the chairman of the hour Jeremy Roland Barthes Francis Bacon Jeremy Arnel Tzvetan Todorov e.e. cummings the short plump demagogue Bertrans de Born James Joyce Wayne C. Booth Homer Roman Jakobson Julia Kristeva Ali Nourennin at al W.B Yeats Northrup Frye Umberto Eco John Cage Jane Austen a Victorian old maid Julia Kristeva Dr. Santores the Institution Saroja Chaitwantee Traditional Wisdom Gertrude Stein William Shakespeare Peter Brandt Christopher Isherwood Ali Nourennin Anton Chekov the chairman of the hour hagiography Arnel? The lanky henchman Julian Claire Olivier the chairman of the hour Charles at al Homo Scholasticus Lawrence Sterne Choto Rustaveli Scheherezade Tzvetan Todorov the Student Body Karl Marx Plato Tristram Shandy Alessandro Manzoni thus meeting up with the occidental discourse of the Western. (T 622-3)

This peculiar inventory also presents characters from *Thru* (Ali Nourennin, Saroja Chaitwantee, Dr. Santores), thus strengthening the link between preceding (fictional and “real”) texts and people and the present work.

Another case in point is constituted by Larissa being presented as a “dompna soisebuda”, made up of the parts of different women. The dance of the seven veils becomes the dance of her twenty-seven selves,

composed of femme-reine, femme-enfant femme-fatale, grey eminence Cleopatra’s nose Musset’s Muse a bit of Heloise old and new the charming scatterbrain Georges Sand Mme de Merteuil George Eliot Antigone Elizabeth Barrett Browning Elinour of Aquitaine Mrs. Pankhurst Circe Julia Kristeva Joan Baez Penelope Virginia Woolf Helen of Troy la princesse lointaine Scheherezade Pallas Athene la belle indifférente the man with the blue guitar
The dance of the twenty-seven veils [...]



(T 662-3)

Larissa is a fictional character made up of parts of both “real” and fictive personae. The binarism fiction/reality is played upon and shown to be only a

construct: the relationship between the inner reality of the text and the outer, “real” (if we must use that term) world it refers to, is blurred.

With an apparently contradictory dynamics, *Thru* seems to dismantle the idea of fiction as representation of an “outer world reality”, to negate representation – “this being a text, not an imitation of life” (T 657) – focusing the attention of both the reader and the characters on the process which shapes the chimera of writing, on the linguistic and narratological aspects of the novel, endlessly referring to the “optical illusion” it creates, to the fact that its characters are only paper inventions. At the same time however, it shows how the supposed authenticity of the “real” withdraws behind layers of narration, how reality is an illusion and “everything is text”. The notion of a “real” level outside the narrative game is undermined. The text utterly denies the prospect of discerning between “internal” and “external” reality, also by means of the continuous and purposeful shifts of focalization which shake the whole logic of narrative representation. The hierarchy of narrative levels collapses in absolute reversibility, suggesting that there might be no reality apart from the text (“there is nothing outside of the text”).

In this way, *Thru* carries out the deconstructive approach as conceived by Derrida throughout itself and by means of itself. Deconstruction cannot merely reverse an existing metaphysical opposition, but it must also accomplish the second step of its strategy, the contamination and corruption of the same opposition. Brooke-Rose’s text in fact enacts an absolute blurring which subverts the real/fictional dichotomy with the aim of reaffirming its second term, but in a different light.

Indeed, if we consider the correlation between the narrative levels, we see that no apparent link is postulated between the stories, enacting what Genette calls “structural” relationship between diegesis and metadiegesis (Genette 1980 233). As a result, what assumes the utmost importance is the narrating act; the metadiegetic is not important in that it fulfils a specific function (explanation, contrast, analogy or distraction), but in that it is a way of bringing forth narration: “it is the act of narrating itself that fulfils the function of the diegesis, independently of the metadiegetic content” (Genette 1980 233). This is also illuminatingly revealed by Larissa addressing narration in these terms, “I know, it’s a flop. As this one, and the next, redundant but necessary for qualcosa to continue. Narration is life and I am

Scheherezade” (T 711). As for Scheherezade, narrating in *Thru* becomes a way of escaping death: the only thing which matters is to continue inventing stories in a way that keeps the reader’s pleasure and curiosity alive.

Along these lines, Brooke-Rose’s work recasts the importance of the narrative act *per se*: narration is what matters, narration is life, an immense fictional act in which everything and everyone participates. The tension created in the reader by this continuous process of construction and destruction is solved by recasting the fictionality of it all, “You are mad, all of you. You’re talking about all these people as if they really existed” (T 732). Again, as Armel says, “That surely is the trouble, we do not exist. But by all means let’s go on pretending we do” (T 631). If we are unable to distinguish what is “true” from what is “false”, it is because we are not meant to, because it is all “just” narration, narration being neither true nor false, but “simply” narration. The subversion of the opposition truth/falsehood, real/imitation is performed in order to reiterate the importance of the *fictionality of fiction* because, although – as Brooke-Rose has her characters say – “it’s only a semiotic castle [...] we are the text we do not exist [...] we are a pack of lies” (T 733), “narration is [nonetheless] life”.

Going further in the process of deconstruction of fixed meaning, *Thru* thoroughly carries out the subversion of the concept of the book as retaining eternal verities by challenging its very basis, i.e. the idea of a centered subject who has authority over the book and endows it with absolute signification, a transcendental signifier who is the absolute origin of meaning. The question of origin is a fundamental one that links Christian tradition, metaphysics, modern linguistics and psychoanalysis, and which was at the centre of the cultural debate of the time. Psychoanalysis hypothesised an initial state of unity, from which a split followed, inaugurating the entrance of the subject into the social/symbolic. Both Lacan and Kristeva posited in fact the “origin” of the split subject in relation to its primal trauma. Such theories – in line with Christian religion and traditional metaphysics – presupposed a primal happiness followed by the fall into sin. If Derrida counters this logic by showing that arche-writing is always already present and absent, Brooke-Rose’s text playfully addresses the notion of origin as an essential step of its deconstructive strategy.

In *Thru*, several ironical misquotations of the Christian Bible seem to allude to the contemporary debate over the origin of the psychoanalytic subject. The sentence “In the beginning was the parting shot” (T 613) for instance – a rewriting of the phrase “In the beginning was the Word” (Genesis 1:1) – seems to be linking at once all the faces of the debate over the question of origin and recast the whole dispute in irony, probably alluding to the fictionality of all these discourses, but surely relativizing them all at once in the reaffirmation of the play of fictionality. “The Fall was into language” is another misquotation (Cf. Genesis 3: 1-24) which again seems to readdress simultaneously Lacan’s, Kristeva’s and Derrida’s ideas, here even more humorously, as the sentence follows a proper “fall” into language: “go fuck yourself” (T 655). Again, the biblical “go forth and multiply” (T 625) is used to refer to the multiplication of I-narrators in the text as well as to its sexual perspective. Similarly, the sentence “it is more difficult for a phallus-man to enter the I of a woman than for the treasurer of signifiers to enter the paradiso terrestre” (T 595), is both a misquotation (Matthew 19:24, and Mark 10: 25) and a play on the idea of a primal state of happiness in paradise reworked with a sexual twist to allude to the impossibility of understanding between the sexes, whereas the sentence “Adam wants an apple” (T 633) is a reminder of both Generative Grammar and the original sin committed in paradise, which caused The Fall (into language). Even the dogma of Christ’s incarnation is wittingly treated as we read, “did Christ have an Oedipus complex?” (T 723). With this last example, Brooke-Rose clearly teases both Christian religion and psychoanalysis. As Patricia Waugh explains, in the sixties, psychoanalysis seemed to be “able to provide for this world what religion had provided in the past: a means of charting and making safe its unknown terrain in existential and universal terms”. Appropriated by the therapy movement, “psychoanalysis seemed the new fundamentalist religion of the individualistic West” (Waugh 1995 67). Brooke-Rose targets therefore both the text of religion and that of psychoanalysis which tends to replace it.

The use of biblical language and tones (Cf. also T 593, 675) obviously inscribes religion – a “text” like any other – within the all-encompassing intertextual chain. The destruction of the book (and The Bible is in our culture “The Book” *par excellence*) is a necessary violence which “denudes the surface of the text” (Derrida

1976 18), the place of difference which can only be articulated by virtue of the opposition of inside and outside: at the place of difference, arche-writing arises as a deconstructive difference/*différance* which characterises the text as opposed to the idea of book embodying everlasting truths.

For the Western world, eternal truth is generated by the logos and present in speech but only imitated by writing: spoken words are symbols of mental experience, whereas written words are deemed to be symbols of symbols, representative of speech, producing a double of the object in question, so that the written signifier is considered to have “no constitutive meaning” (Derrida 1976 11). Derrida shows that this concept is a trope, an illusion, that there is no original truth present in the logos to which writing is subordinate, no *a priori* sense that writing transcribes, since writing is the very “condition of the epistémè” (Derrida 1976 27). Once the predominance of speech over writing has been inverted, a new notion of writing, “originary writing” or “arche-writing”, can arise as the place of difference, a liminal space between and within them.

Thru overtly addresses the idea that speech has always been privileged over writing as “present to itself”, opposed to the “non-self-presence” (Derrida 1976 8, 17) of writing. We read for instance that “words imply the absence of things” (T 725, 728), or else that “a text [...] inevitably produce a double of the thing re-presented, the double being nothing, a non-being which nevertheless is added to the thing” (T 721). At the same time, however, the text subverts the speaking/writing dichotomy, endlessly distorting it to demonstrate that there is no primacy between its two “opposites”. The Derridean deconstructive practice is thoroughly enacted in *Thru*, as also demonstrated by the fact that the terms *trace* and *architrace* appear already in the novel’s first pages (Cf. T 584). Disguised as acrostics, they are overdetermined by means of bold capitals: the already observed textual process of “giving and taking away” both reveals and hides one of the main threads of the text.

The reader of *Thru* is seemingly presented with both oral discourses and explicitly written pieces which “interrupt” the flow of talk. Speaking is acted by means of dialogues, interjections, class discussions, as well as by means of popular, oral narratives inserted in the text (folktales, lullabies, idioms). Writing is given in letters, lists (of participants to the various class discussions and of characters), in the

extra-authorial literary texts reported within the main text, in the students' homework and in the handwritten teacher's comments to them. The speaking/writing binarism is revealed to be as old as the Western civilization: "Take Homer for instance through to the civilization of the sign with its dualistic binary structure and its vertical hierarchy" (T 610). The dichotomy is endlessly blurred as written pieces could be also interpreted as oral and *vice versa*. The pieces of homework and the comments to them in fact could be there as *both* oral and written narrative: they could be interpreted as being read aloud during the lesson, or as being presented to the reader in their written form, or again they could reflect the objective consciousness of the momentary narrator, who looks at the written page and (but not necessarily) reads it to the class. Inversely, the discourses which we believe as oral, could be written as well, being part of the very novel Armel, Larissa or the students are writing.

The boundary between written and spoken is also abolished by means of terms which presuppose both the written vehicle and the speaking subject in order to be appreciated. This is the case of onomatopoeic words or puns: although necessarily presented by means of writing, they presuppose the act of speaking. Writing and speaking are shown to be interdependent, form and content are both stressed. A further "level" of interaction between writing and speaking is suggested when the master seems to be dictating his text to Jacques, "To begin with, I mean, sorry scrub that" (T 644): dictation simultaneously entails and interrelates the acts of speaking and writing.

If oral and written discourses engage in an endless play which subverts their distinction, a never-ending blurring which ultimately results in undecidability, the text seems to imply that to grant one term priority over the other is neither possible nor productive. Indeed, the idea of an originary writing which lies at the place of difference between writing and speaking is introduced in the very first page of the novel as we read,

Who Speaks?

le rétro	visueur	(some	languages
more	visible than	others)	

(T 579)

"Rétrovisueur" is the French term for "rear-mirror". However, the words "rétro" and "visueur" appear separated on the page, so that if we only hear them, we think of

the rear-mirror, but as we see them, the two words' respective connotations interact with each other and produce new meanings. The terms come respectively from the Latin "rētro" – back, indicating a backward movement or a backward position – and "vīsus" – past participle of the verb "vidēre", to see. In English, "retro" is both an adjective referring to things of the past and a prefix used to form adjectives and nouns which indicate that something goes back or backwards, whereas "visor" indicates either the part of a helmet/cap which protects the eyes, or the screen inside the car which can be turned down to protect the driver's eyes from light reflection, i.e. something quite different from a mirror, used to help the eyes see rather than to shade them. Thus, "le rétro viseur" acquires the meaning of someone (the "vizir" present in the text?) or something who looks back or from the back. The term seems therefore to address the dichotomy speaking/writing in the same way as the Derridean *différance*: recurrence to the written word is basic to its understanding. The reference to Derrida is made stronger by the use of the French term.

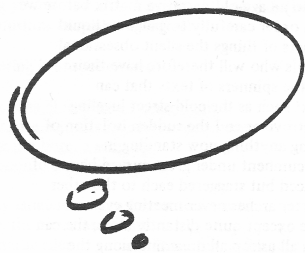
Apart from this, the new meaning of rear-mirror as "someone looking back or being looked at from the back" introduces the Lacanian notion of a subject incenssantly looking back in order to project itself into the future, as well as the concept of gaze, which is subject and object at the same time. The Barthesian/Lacanian question "who speaks?" is another cross-reference to the French critical debate. The idea that some languages are "more visible than others", apart from reminding us again of the French *différance* (which must be visible in order to be grasped), draws attention to another subtending idea of Brooke-Rose's fictional practice, one which we have already seen in relation to *Between*. This is the concept that "It can't be all in one language", and that one language necessarily expresses something differently than another. The fact that a single paragraph calls into question all these implications can help us better appreciate the way the text *simultaneously* addresses and *inextricably* mingles all the issues it tackles.

I will here hazard a further interpretation of the passage: the French "le rétro viseur" is countered by the English "(some languages more visible than others)" put within parenthesis: not only French is a "more visible" language because the word "viseur" (as opposed to mirror) – entailing the Latin root of the verb *vidēre* – establishes an immediate connection with the act of seeing, but also because the

contemporary French literary practice caused more sensation and clamour than the English counterpart. In this light, the allusion could be ironical of the state of things in the literary environment of the time.

If *Thru* subverts the dichotomy speaking/writing, it also goes further along the deconstructive process in that it blurs the distinction among other different “performative acts” such as thinking, reading, looking at, and singing. These acts, all *represented* in the text when not *mimetically enacted*, are difficult to distinguish from one another.

The process of thinking is present in characters’ thought, detectable in vertical through the horizontality of the speech. The mix of speech and thought patterns aims at rendering their simultaneity through a means that is by its very constitution unable to do so. The two processes which go on at the same time, one evident, the other much less, make the reader feel as if they were reading the characters’ mind. Their unusual disposition could be also said to “mime” the horizontality of the speech act (propagating by means of sound waves in the air) and the verticality of thought (happening in the mind of the individual and therefore reflecting a vertical pattern). The act of thinking, a basic tool for reading capacity, is also mimed on the page with the portrayal of a “space for words” in the style of comics, which can also be interpreted as a space for the reader to stop and think, and indeed the reader is forced to pause and make sense of this picture,



(T 596)

The act of reading and its process of “deciphering” are addressed throughout the novel. We read the written pieces which are probably being read aloud in the text (reading within reading). We decipher anagrams, acrostics, graphical patterns, musical notes, we interpret drawings as well as words, so that the act of reading/interpreting is itself one of the key subjects/objects of the text.

Features appealing to the reader’s visual capacity are obviously timetables, indexes, lists, handwriting, onomatopoetic spelling of words, graphical texts,

symbols such as the triangle (which both symbolises the eye and reminds us of the road sign indicating danger), drawings (the dance of the twenty-seven veils and the arrow pointing at it, the “space for thought” or for “filling the air” in the comics style). All these features demand a visual understanding on the reader’s part. The dance of the twenty-seven veils entails both the act of looking at and performing a visual deed: the text literally performs the dance by means of a dancing wheel drawn on the page, whereas the names of twenty-seven dancing characters appear on each of its spokes. The reader looks at the wheel before reading what is on its spokes – a more immediate understanding of content is achieved through form. These visual, textual characteristics draw the reader away from the idea they have of narrative as a horizontally developing medium and play on the notion of deep/surface meaning: if we are used to reading a text’s meaning plunging into the horizontality of the words arranged on the page (deciphering characters, letters on a page), here we have the surface image which is meaningful for its external shape and which is not always horizontal on the page. What is this if not playing with the notions of form/content, deep/surface, speaking/writing/thinking/looking/reading processes?

The act of singing is performed by means of the lullabies and popular songs reported on the page. Such features play on their sound value to blur the distinction of levels in the text: while reading them, the reader is almost brought to sing them in their mind. Moreover, popular songs and lullabies – traditional oral folk narratives – seem to address the question of the distinction between oral and written tradition as well as the division of literary genres – not only are they a text within a text, or a discourse within a discourse, but also a genre within a genre.

In *Thru*, the reversibility of levels is developed to extremes. Narration “expands”, so as not only to include the oral and the written form, but also to *mime* on the page the acts of dancing and singing and to include the process of thinking as a basic pattern in and to the text. The reader sees the dance before he reads it, “hears” the songs, reads stories and is forced to stop and decipher all these acts. The effect of such an all-encompassing activity on the reader is bewilderment, a feeling of destabilization at the crumbling of the firm barriers of more conventional fiction. However, if the text is not dismissed at this initial sense of puzzlement, its reader will

inevitably re-consider the idea of the novel as a genre, and come to appreciate all the more such a ground-breaking work.

Such a mixture of levels of expression, together with the arrangement of the material patterns on the page, crucially affects both the space and the tempo of the narrative. The mere horizontality of the text collapses, and with it the idea of a consistently-paced narrative. Clearly, even conventional narratives slow or accelerate their pace to induce various feelings in the reader, yet here we are on a completely different ground: the narrative rhythm, the reading and the interpretation of the text are strongly and *ineluctably* affected by its collage of techniques.

In fact, if arche-trace, the place of difference between the opposite terms real/fictional and speaking/writing indelibly affects the textual dynamics of signification, it also interrelates with Lacan's theories to determine the novel's temporal and spatial development.

As already said, the movement introduced in the opening of the novel (four eyes staring back through the rear-mirror of a car), is that of someone who can look ahead only by looking back and *vice versa*. This movement simultaneously addresses the Lacanian notion of gaze and the Derridean idea of memory as trace.

In literary terms, the concept of gaze is significant of the relationship amongst the objects/subjects of narration, reflecting their power-structures in terms of symmetry or asymmetry. In *Thru*, we are offered a great variety of gazes (those of the many characters/narrators of the moment), yet what is most important is their *direction*: each gaze, be it individual or collective, intra-diegetic or extra-diegetic, is always and repeatedly coming back upon the person doing the gaze, being "sent back" on them. Each character is forever looking back at the other: the gazes multiply and continually recede further back in terms of narrative levels. The narrative itself is gazing at its characters gazing at each other and they are all gazing at the reader, who stares back.

This forever-coming-back gaze is what Lacan theorises as constitutive of the subject's narcissistic relation to itself. In the mirror stage, the baby gazes at the mirror and sees itself as unified subject, ideal ego. This initiates the dialectic between the ideal-ego and the ego-ideal, between the idealized image of oneself and the imaginary gaze of another on oneself. Once the subject enters its own split and the

symbolic order, culture and language, that narcissistic ideal image is maintained in the imaginary order and can be filled in by anyone that the subject sets up – in what is ultimately a narcissistic relationship – as a mirror for itself. Its own gaze coming back upon itself continually reminds the subject of the lack at the heart of the symbolic order.

The Lacanian doubly split subject, constantly facing its own lack, is introduced at the very beginning of *Thru* with the rear-mirror image: it is a subject seized between its own image which comes from behind but is projected forwards. Lacan's decentered subject continuously projects its past into the future as the only means of recognising itself. The trauma of the subject is projected into the future and can be recuperated only by means of this future projection, i.e. obliquely: "The Trauma, in so far as it has a repressing action, intervenes after the fact (*après coup*), *nachträglich*" (Lacan 1988 191). The trauma of the barred subject is thus an "unspecularizable" event which can be accessed only from a rear-view perspective. The split subject experiences a temporal loop as it can recuperate its own past only by projecting it into the future: "a retroversion effect by which the subject becomes at each stage what he was before and announces himself –he will have been– only in the future perfect tense" (Lacan 1989 306). This phenomenon describes an ambiguous temporality where past and future are inverted – the past coming after the future and the future before the past – and affect each other.

This belatedness subtends and creates the tempo of Brooke-Rose's novel: a circular and self-reflexive narrative caught up in a forever "gazing-back movement": characters gazing back at each other, text gazing back at itself and at other texts, language gazing back at itself.

In *Thru*, language gazes back at itself in that, apart from being metalanguage, it is "circular". In fact, if for Lacan meaning is retroactive in relation to the signifying chain, in that "the sentence completes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect" (Lacan 1989 303), Brooke-Rose takes up Lacan's functioning of the signifying chain and plays with it by inverting the notions of *langue* and *parole*,

although from the point of view of *la parole* the end of the sentence commands its first words, we should adopt the point of view of *la langue* in which the beginning of the sentence commands the end,

thus opening the whole network of possibilities in which we can then construct our sequences of functions. (T 627)

The point of view adopted in the text is clearly that of *la parole*, which opens up the whole network of possibilities of actualization of *la langue*. The openness of *la parole* is opposed to the closure of *la langue* and of the completed signifying chain. In *Thru*, in fact, sentences do not end, but rather slide into one another, generating an open narrative which offsets closure. The open network of possibilities of expressions and connotations of *la parole* counters fixed meaning. Moreover, the above quotation seems to imply that in *Thru*, discourse is caught up within a retrospective phenomenon, as its past continuously returns to affect its future and the future retroactively determines the past (intertextuality). *Thru* is thus a circular, open space which by means of its endless mirroring offsets the sclerotic use of language. As Berressem puts it, “what Roland Barthes calls the ‘vast hermeneutical sentence’ can never be closed” (Berressem 106).

The narrative movement of belatedness which subtends the temporality of *Thru* perfectly embodies Derrida’s notion of memory as trace and calls into question his concept of present. Together with trace and arche-trace, memory is indeed enumerated by the author among the themes of the novel (Cf. Brooke-Rose 2002b 65).

Derrida takes up the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, the belated return of trauma, to describe the effect of deferral and *différance* and demonstrate that Freud (and Lacan) already potentially presents memory and its movement as trace, i.e. “origin” of meaning. Derrida shows that for Freud, the printed trace which is left on the human psyche following the impact of a certain event (a trauma), and which also depends on the frequency of that event or impression, on its repetition, functions as arche-trace. The memory-trace, generated by trauma and repetition, reconstructs meaning through deferral which is memorial, commemorative of the trace. It inscribes itself in the economy of life and death in relation to a trauma through its movement of deferral: life protects itself against death only through an economy of death, through repetition and deferral (Cf. Derrida 1978 253)¹³. The psyche, like a Mystic Writing Pad, records an infinite amount of material while

¹³ It is important to bear in mind that “life” is not taken to be as “life present-to-itself”, but as trace and *différance*. In this sense life *is* death, a “non-origin which is originary” (Derrida 2001 255).

always remaining “intact”. We do not apprehend the world directly, but only retrospectively: our sense of that which is beyond ourselves is the product of previous memories, previous writings. Freud’s writing pad is thus a model for the trace and arche-writing, for the way in which we can only experience the world, as it were, after the fact, that is, through the traces of previous experiences. The conclusion is that arche-writing *is* memory and memory *is* arche-writing. It follows that the operation of signification as sheer perceptual presence, absolute, pure, is a metaphysical presupposition. Self-presence as such is impossible: what constitutes what we call “present” is the connection between past and future, i.e. the movement of repetition of the past, and the movement of the present itself as a possibility of future repetition. Repetition becomes the trace, the *différance* which deconstructs a notion of closed off present-to-itself and for itself, a movement strictly linked to the intertextual theme: literature is a text where everything comes back again and again to generate new life out of the old, create a new text out of its intertextual reminders. The present is both a return, and the possibility of a return, of repetition. Presence is only possible by means of the *différance*, the trace, the operation of signification which endlessly links past and future. Signification does not depend on presence as origin (the author, the speaker, meaning), it is independent from the absence, because arche-writing is at work at the “origin” of sense. Meaning is never simply present, but *always already* engaged in the movement of the trace. The so-called “present”, or “now”, is always already compromised by a trace, a residue of a previous experience that precludes the subject ever being in a self-contained “now”: coinciding with oneself as immediate spontaneity is impossible. There can be no presence-to-self because the nature of our temporal existence implies its elusion, because meaning is always in a process of becoming. The significance of the past can only be appreciated from the future, but the future is itself caught in a similar process of change were it ever able to become present. The future that Derrida refers to is thus not a future that will become present, but the future that makes all presence possible and impossible at the same time. The living present – lebendige Gegenwart – as “the universal and absolute form of transcendental experience” (Derrida 1976 62), as the objective, external tempo of science, is an illusion. The same Larissa warns Armel

“The present tense does not exist” (T 630). The present is replaced by the notion of time deferred: everything is always to come, meaning continually slips away.

In this light, both the loop between past and future of the discourse in *Thru* and its movement of repetition perfectly reproduce the functioning of memory as trace, arche-writing. The temporal loop is further highlighted by the fact that Larissa seems to foresee some of the novel’s scenes, in a curious game where past and future overlap,

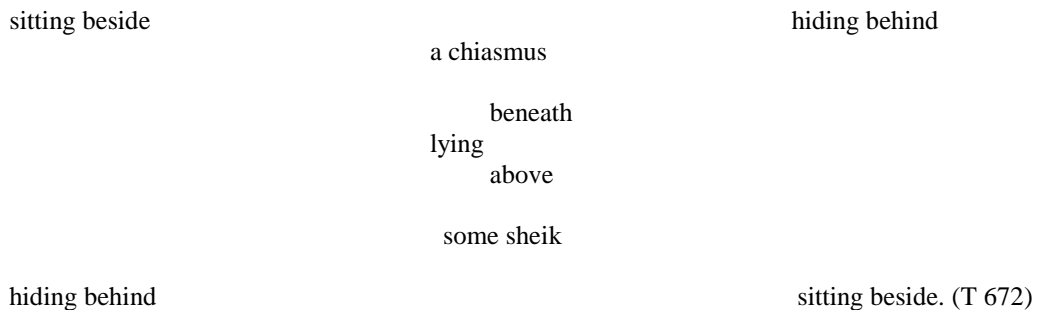
Larissa would say well tell me all and how did you two meet closing the manuscript in which she’d been inventing the whole episode before she knew it would turn out that way that happens you know and the whole dialogue in advance. (T 731)

The stress on the ambiguous temporality of the text seems a way to stimulate the readers’ attentiveness and their wish to look for clues which refer to the consequential development of events. Yet, *Thru* continually frustrates “the reader’s vulgar desire to know what happens next” (T 732) since, if the “now” is precisely what is for ever eluded, if there is no present, there cannot possibly be a “next” which consequentially develops from it.

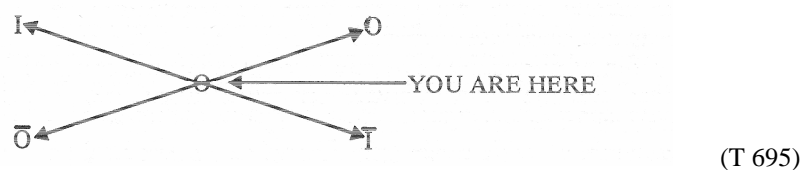
In *Thru* in fact, “anachronies” (Genette 1980 35) – temporal discordances between the order of events and the order of narration – are not retraceable because the chronological order is utterly transgressed, impossible to reconstruct. At the same time, “anisochronies” – the dynamics between “story time” and “narrative time” which determine the rhythm of the narrative – are distorted as the text does not furnish precise divisions of paragraphs/parts/chapters, but only varied spatial breaks on the page. The use of a “doubting language” as considered above strongly contributes to shape the temporal indeterminacy of *Thru*, blurring the “determination” and “specification” in time of an event, i.e. the “the diachronic limits” and the “rhythm of recurrence” of an event (Cf. Genette 127-8). If we think of “meanwhile” as one of the most frequently used adverbs to change focus at the beginning of a paragraph, we realise how everything seems to be inscribed within the same ambiguous temporal plateau. A circular tempo, with no beginning and no end, shaped by the present tense and by the intertextual, repetitive theme which links past and future and “reduces” everything to one single, immense narration.

Similarly to its temporal development, the narrative spatiality of *Thru* is circular, or better chiasmic. The term “chiasm” derives from the Greek “χίασμα”,

“crossing”, where the first letter (chi) is shaped like an X. Chiastic patterns are present throughout the novel, both as drawings and through the recurrence of the letter X (with the endlessly repeated words “Text” and “Exit”, where the X is often printed in bold types), to the point where a chiasmic shape is reproduced by means of words on the page and at its centre we find the word “chiasmus”,



This symmetric/concentric structure recalls Greimas’ semiotic square and indeed, as already seen, *Thru* addresses the latter directly, positing “opposite” terms in a direct logic of correlation and denoting them with the Greimasian “d1/d2” (T 634), as well as with the *I* and *O* of the Lacanian dialectic of desire,



The play of *la parole* as opposed to *la langue* generates a chiasmic space in the narrative discourse. The actualization of *la parole* implies that every discourse coming back is never the same: “every chasm opens into another chasm into which it is possible to fall as into a void” (T 687). Repetitions in *Thru* are “the same but different”, slightly varied in content and/or context, as repetition is not the mere return to and of the same, but rather the production of difference within the same, a generative act. It is a continual referral, rather than reference, to other traces. The repetitive and deferring movement of memory constitutes the present as an infinite stratification and rearrangement of signs of memory (Cf. Derrida 1978 258). As Derrida explains, “our psychic mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification [...] of memory traces [...] subjected from time to time to a rearrangement” (Derrida 1976 259).

Repetition thus shapes both the temporality and the spatiality of the text, inscribing it into a spiral development of space and time. The chiasmic movement becomes in fact that of a spiral, recalling Giambattista Vico's repetitive movement of history and being closely connected to intertextuality and memory: the past returns to affect the present, everything comes back but is different at the same time.

The recursivity rule on which intertextuality is based is both "exemplified by the innumerable repetitions slightly varied" (Maack 135) and explained throughout the text by means of such sentences as "Within each texture is another texture within each myth another myth each signifier signifying another" (T 688), or else by means of paragraphs as the following one,

Texts within texts [...] Francesca reading about Lancelot and Guinevere, who must have read about Tristan and Iseult [...] as told by Socrates to Phaedrus as related by Plato [...] This structure is generated by recursivity rules [...] In theory the recursivity rule can be applied infinitely but there is a limit imposed by the human memory of both recipient and emitter, a limit which demonstrates the difference between grammaticality and acceptability. (T 677-678)

Although the point of arrival seems to coincide with the point of departure, in a spiral what comes back is different, as the structure is circular, but not closed. *Thru* thus embodies Barthes' notion of the plural text which replaces its closed circuit with an open and dialectic structure, thus challenging any interpretative reduction, any arbitrary imposition of meaning. For Barthes, to the question "*What are you thinking about?*", the text "*wilier than all those who try to escape by answering: about nothing*", does not reply, giving meaning its last closure: suspension" (Barthes 1974 217).

Another feature which strongly concurs to determine the narrative temporality of Brooke-Rose's novel is its peculiar typographical display. Although it is necessarily true that the narrative text "has no other temporality than what it borrows [...] from its own reading" (Genette 1980 34), in *Thru* the idea of the time needed for reading (for going *through* the text) is clearly being played upon. The reader in fact necessarily needs to slow down in order to decipher the various visual patterns the novel presents.

What is more, *Thru's* typographical arrangements subvert the linearity literature is constrained by and offer "a kind of global and synchronic look – or at least a look whose direction is no longer determined by the sequence of images" (Genette 1980 34).

Reading is no longer linear, horizontal, no longer dependent on past, present and future, but inscribed into a sort of global simultaneity which involves a different perception of narrative time and space. If Kristeva theorises a form of literature “that will perhaps arrive at a form of thought similar to that of painting: the transmission of essence through form” (Kristeva 1980a 89), this is exactly what Brooke-Rose’s text achieves through its visual display.

Graphic experiments are clearly not new in literature. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* – significantly one of the main subtexts of *Thru* – already makes use of typographical tricks. However, the visual display of *Thru* bears peculiar implications as related to the concept of arche-writing. Derrida considered in fact “phonetic writing” – the consecutive and irreversible unfolding of meaning in space – to be “the cornerstone of all metaphysics of presence” (Derrida 2001 272-3). He consequently conjectured the end of linear writing and the beginning of a new mode of writing and reading: “What is thought today cannot be written according to the line and the book”, we must learn to read “what wrote itself between the lines [...] according to a different organization of space” (Derrida 1976 87, 86).

Thru’s graphical forms can be thus interpreted as revealing that arche-writing is at work in the text. They are a writing which does “not reduce the voice to itself” (Derrida 1976 90) and bears a “double value – ideographic and phonetic” (Derrida 1976 89): a representation of both thing and sound. The non-phonetic elements make writing necessary to signification and therefore subvert the phonocentrism of Western thought. Such elements are primarily present in the unconscious language of dreams, whose “mise en scène” (Derrida 2001 261) is to be interpreted as a “displacement similar to an original form of writing [...] a model of writing irreducible to speech, which would include [...] pictographic, ideogrammatic, and phonetic elements” (Derrida 2001 262). The “psychical writing” Derrida talks about cannot be deciphered once and for all according to a fixed code, since it works “with a mass of elements which have been codified in the course of an individual or collective history” (Derrida 2001 262), and since, away from the logic of binarism, dreams accept contradiction. Psychical writing can therefore only be interpreted. The same content can acquire different meanings for diverse people and in dissimilar contexts: “The dreamer invents his own grammar” (Derrida 2001 262). It is not a

case that Brooke-Rose inserts in *Thru* Chinese ideograms (already used by Pound for the same reason), as they function in a similar way to dream symbols: they bear several meanings and their interpretation depends on their context. In addition, the terms “Mise en scène” and “mise-en-abime” – persistently used by Freud and Derrida – are significantly employed several times, thus strengthening the reference to Derrida’s theory.

The text furnishes no final message which completes the narrative, but remains open and in this connection we appreciate the presence, throughout the text, of the open quadrangular shape, once again linked to Derrida’s deconstruction of unity and closure. Derrida explains that the binary, opposite terms can be neither reduced to unity, nor re-inscribed into a third term. The trinitarian horizon of the onto-theology must be destroyed, the triangle opened on a fourth side, re-inscribed into a open square, the deconstructive square, constituted through the operations of reversal and displacement (Cf. Derrida 1981 24). The rectangular shapes in *Thru* can be therefore seen as representing its deconstructive, open proliferation of meaning.

Writing becomes a “breaching” through repetition which opens a path in time and space and is characterised by reversibility (Cf. Derrida 1978 268). Reversibility is for Derrida the very “origin” of meaning (*always already there*) as it is to be found in the genetic DNA and RNA codes. The “first” form of writing, the first grammé which enacts an endless movement of deferral/differing is the genes. The concept of reversibility is presented in *Thru* by means of palindromes and enacted through the continuous shift of narrative levels – which once again generates the openness of the text and counters any attempt to endow the text with a stable, hierarchical meaning.

The circular, or better spiral movement of *Thru* and its openness are significantly represented at the end of the novel. Its last page in fact, presents the “same” situation to be found at its beginning: four eyes staring back through a rear-view mirror: involved in an open spiral process, the text has completed a full circle (it has added another circle to the spiral of intertextuality) and has come to a point which is both equal and different from its starting one. The difference (and the openness of the spiral) is highlighted by the very last image of the text, a palindromic cross which offers an “exit thru the text” and which we will later better analyse.

Thru's language and narrative features, determining the temporal and spatial "development" of the text, seem thus to recast the importance of writing as "origin" of meaning, an origin which founds human existence but which is both present and absent at the same time, therefore countering the notions of transcendental signifier and eternal verity and showing how proliferation of meaning and undecidability lie at the very basis of existence.

From all that has been considered, Brooke-Rose's countertendency in relation to the crisis of language and representation clearly emerges. *Thru* is on the one hand a fully postmodern work which stems from the tension of the debate over the ontological status of reality and its connection to language. A "text of radical ontological hesitation" (McHale 1995 200), whose idea of "loss" of language as a means of representing reality is reinstated by the author as she says "there is in everything I write, perhaps, a kind of pessimism underneath" (Turner 1990b 25). On the other hand, however, *Thru* makes use of postmodernist critical concepts and – mixing and rehandling them – succeeds in subverting the negativism of much postmodern fiction into a playful reaffirmation of the fictional play and its language.

As already observed, with an apparently contradictory dynamics – contradiction being the primary tactic through which the text multiplies meanings and interpretations – *Thru* both dismantles the idea of fiction as representing reality and denies the prospect of discerning between "internal" and "external" reality. The "real" level outside the narrative game is undermined together with the notion of fiction as representing that reality.

If, on the one hand, it is stated that "mimesis inevitably produces a double of the thing, the double being nothing a non being which [is] however resembling, never absolutely true" (T 684), on the other hand, it is impossible to separate what is "true" from what is "false" as the once steady border between reality and representation collapses: reality becomes fiction and *vice versa*.

The subversion of the real/fictional dichotomy is not enacted as a means to itself, but rather as a way to reaffirm the second term in a thoroughly playfully and positive way, as if the text continually asked and replied «reality vs. invention? there is no such a struggle, reality *is* invention and invention *is* reality ... narration is life».

By endlessly blurring the distinction between real and fictional and by exposing the foundations of the fictional edifice – “but the emperor is naked” (T 602) – by making the realistic conception of fiction collapse, the importance of fictionality *per se* is reinstated.

With a parallel movement, *Thru* seem to reinstate the representational role of language through the notion of arche-writing which determines the temporal and spatial development of the text. Challenging and subverting the concept of fixed meaning and self-presence is a way of recuperating the value of language as representing “reality”. Let us explain better: the crisis of reality’s ontological status has generated the crisis of language as unable to represent “reality”. However, the crisis of representation does not depend on language, but rather on the Western world cultural trope of a stable and fixed meaning which language can express. Once the idea of an established meaning that language transcribes is deconstructed, language can recuperate its “representative” role, *even if* what it represents is ontologically unstable and meaning is never fixed once and for all, but always undecidable.

In contrast to the supposed crisis of representation, in which language and reality are incommensurate, *Thru*’s subversive strategy circumvents this dilemma. It directs the reader’s attention to language as “surface reality”, pure materiality and visible display. In a moment when language is considered unable to represent “reality”, the play on the external shape of the linguistic sign becomes a way to recuperate the “joy” of language by insisting on its materiality. In this way, *Thru* highlights the way in which fiction and reality are mutually bound up in language, in a “visible”, and therefore “real” way.

The text reiterates its own reality *as* language: fiction is real in that it is made up of language. Everything articulated in language attains the status of reality,

what is the epistemological status of, say, a Structuralist diagram such as the rectangle of contraries and contradictions from elementary logic [...] used by Greimas [...]? As a representation of a narrative structure, it is a fiction [...] As a rectangle on a page it is an object, a visual fact. (Brooke-Rose 2002b 55)

Language is *real* and it is the only means to “pick up” reality, *even if* this reality is ontologically unstable. In fact, as the author has one of her characters in the novel say, “Language is all we have to apprehend reality, if we must use that term” (T 642). Although the level of the real world is ontologically unstable, language is the only means we possess to express it, even if to express that same instability and

the lack of our existence. *Thru* becomes thus a fiction about the fictionality of fiction, but also about the “reality” of fiction and language, a way of recuperating the “faith” in language and fiction in the face of reality’s ontological instability.

Not only is language real, but also and necessarily referential. One of the basic concepts in Brooke-Rose’s fictional practice is indeed the notion of language’s referential status. As Paul de Man explains, “It would be quite foolish to assume that one can lightheartedly move away from the constraint of referential meaning” (de Man 201). Brooke-Rose reinstates this view: “I can understand the reaction against the mimetic novel, that language isn’t just a transparent window on the world [...] and so there was this movement towards the *signifiant*, the actual text, textuality, but language is itself representative and you cannot do without this representative function” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 41). This does not imply a simple, naïve “mimesis” in the style of the nineteenth century realistic and “unproblematic” representation of the world, but it rather means that, in an era of reality’s ontological crisis, language remains referential even if the status of its referents is floating, unstable. Explaining the link between language and the “reality” of representation, Brooke-Rose says,

I’m often called antirealist, and since I use realist situations to play with them and produce other discourse, in that sense it’s true. But language is referential, and every sentence we utter is intended to be realistic in this more absolute sense [...] So, I’m more of an anti-Realist, with a capital R. Thus every sentence in *Thru* represents a reality, however imagined, however destabilized, as we all are. (Brooke-Rose 2002b 65)

Further clarifying this point, the author declares, “I am not antirealist, if by realism one means representation, and I do not think that a writer can be antirepresentation” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 41).

If language is reality and if the reality it refers to is ontologically unstable, Brooke-Rose tries to recover the lost faith in language’s possibilities and she does so primarily through humour and linguistic creativity. If the text is performed entirely by language and through language, the author tries to push it to its borders, to twist language so as to pass its frontiers, to see how far it can go, rehandling it in playful creation. Language, her primary “artist material”, *is* reality, a reality which can be played upon. Humour, ever-present in Brooke-Rose’s narrative, becomes a way of recuperating the lost faith in the possibilities of language.

When – referring to the anagrammatic turn of *Thru* into “hurt” – Del Sapio Garbero asks Brooke-Rose whether language is employed in her novels to cover up

anguish or despair, the author interestingly replies recalling a scene from it where Armel accuses Larissa of “escaping” into language, “there are moments when you touch on the very essence of things and then brrt! You escape, you run away into language” (T 640). Larissa significantly argues, “You mean that when I touch on the essence of things [...] it’s not by means of language? [...] aren’t you playing with words too, doesn’t everyone?” (T 640-41). The author reveals that the event described did actually happen to her and that she wrote it *verbatim* immediately after it occurred. In this prospect, the episode is important as it represents both a self-attack and a self-defence of Brooke-Rose’s text, an answer to those who might accuse her of using language as a means of “running away” from reality. Larissa’s reply, Brooke-Rose explains, “even if it’s a defence, it’s not covering up because the suffering is there and the seriousness is there”. Seriousness and humour are two inseparable faces of language, both “present all the time” (Del Sapio Garbero 1991 105, 104).

Indeed, if Armel pronounces himself against Larissa’s novel as “it’s not funny, [...] it is one long cry of anguish” (T 640), Larissa reinstates, “But isn’t the only thing to do with a long cry of anguish to amuse oneself?” (T 641).

Rather than an escape, humour represents a powerful *coping mechanism*. The eternal game of language is a way to cope with the lack that lies at the hearth of the reality it represents, to subvert it into a positive play, as the same text explains: “It is the pain [...] and pain [...] has to be lived through, and you could cover pages and maybe you do, rehandling the signifiers into acceptability and even amusement so that at last it vanishes like delight” (T 690). Playing with language, the “obstinate humor in the face of despair” (Hayman and Cohen 14), far from being mere escape from, is for the author a way to face reality and problems, overcoming the nihilistic aspects of the contemporary critical debate and inscribing her novelistic practice beyond them.

Inextricably related to all this is the poetical value of the language of *Thru*, which we have already considered in light of Kristeva’s theories. *Thru* is in fact a polyphonic novel which, far from being merely parodic, is rather tragic, dramatic, “murderous, cynical, and revolutionary in the sense of *dialectical transformation*”.

The poetic language of the text reveals the semiotic as negativity continuously breaching into the symbolic and transgressing it.

The semiotic however – a “return of instinctual functioning within the symbolic” (Kristeva 1984 69) – does not annihilate the symbolic, it is not pure negation, it is transgression and negation which results in *modified reaffirmation*. As Kristeva explains, the “explosion of the semiotic in the symbolic is far from a negation of negation”, it is rather “a transgression of position, a reversed reactivation of the contradiction that instituted this very position” (Kristeva 1984 69). The symbolic is not annulled (schizophrenia), it is transgressed and reactivated on the inverted ladder of its open coexistence with the semiotic: laughter becomes “murder and revolution” (Antonin Artaud, qtd. in Kristeva 1980a 80), *a death which brings new life*,

“art” takes on murder and moves through it. It assumes murder insofar as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes “art.” In other words, it is as if death becomes interiorized by the subject of such a practice; in order to function, he must make himself the bearer of death [...] In returning, through the event of death, toward that which produces its break; in exporting semiotic motility across the border on which the symbolic is established, the artist sketches out a kind of second birth. Subject to death but also to rebirth. (Kristeva 1984 70)

The “deluge of the signifier” (Kristeva 1984 79) inundates the symbolic and dissolves it, thus becoming “the flow of jouissance into language” and *through* language. By means of poetic language, “jouissance works its way into the social and symbolic” (Kristeva 1984 80). In other words, poetic language lets jouissance come through the symbolic and into language. The function of poetic language is thus “to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it [...] the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution” (Kristeva 1984 81).

If Kristeva says that “literature moves beyond madness and realism in a leap that maintains both ‘delirium’ and ‘logic’” (Kristeva 1984 82), *Thru* is said to be a discourse where “mouths into mouths [...] rehandle the signifiers into a delicious discourse” (T 722). Negativity becomes “the liquefying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather reactivates new organizations and, in that sense, affirms” (Kristeva 1984 109).

Interestingly, Brooke-Rose hypothesises that the only possible solution to the degradation of characters and the renewal of fiction lies in the use of language, the

only hope for their regeneration consists perhaps in “starting again, *ex almost nihilo*. So that narrative can again, as it once did, aspire to the condition of poetry” (Brooke-Rose 1986 194). In this connection, the very language that builds up the text and even the title Brooke-Rose initially wanted to give the novel – *Texttermination* – stand for the possibility of a death and a rebirth of narrative practice.

If *Thru* is, on the one hand, a fully postmodernist work which deals with the problems of representation and subjectivity through “their negation or engulfment in discursive practices” (Rimmon-Kenan 1996 4), it is on the other hand an attempt to rescue the possibilities of fiction and language *through* verbal inventiveness. The novel subverts the “pessimistic” notion of representation and goes beyond its destabilization, gaining an exit from the debate: an exit *through* itself. It is a workshop text which playfully aims at re-engaging the act of narration with the idea of language and representation. It is in the light of such a *positive play* that Brooke-Rose’s work represents, in my view, a *countertendency* within postmodernism.

Thru enacts a never-ending play with language, which on the one hand generates ontological instability, yet on the other produces an immense plurality of “signification” and aims at recuperating the lost faith in language as the only tool we possess to express “reality”, as well as linguistic humour as a way to cope with pessimism in life and language. The creative possibilities of language are thus a way to deal with problems, as Brooke-Rose states, “What I want to show is the extraordinary richness of language in the face of our problems big and small” (Turner 1990b 27). The text thus becomes a way of facing the crisis of language and representation, and indeed *Thru* defines itself “A self-evident defence-mechanism against threat of extermination” (T 637).

Thru’s fundamental questioning of representation and subjectivity implies deconstruction but also and most importantly playful “construction” of the text itself, a positive creation. *Through* the incessant play of signifiers, through language as its “only means”, the text is being questioned and reasserted, destroyed and recreated again and again. Brooke-Rose deconstructs, negates fiction, or better double-negates it, in order to recuperate its very notion.

We witness a procedure already observed in *Between*: the endorsement of crisis in order to overcome it. If in the case of *Between* the crisis and death is that of language as linked to identity, in this case is that of language as linked to fiction.

The double movement toward construction and deconstruction of meaning in *Thru* makes us realise that “The pressure toward meaning and the pressure toward its undoing can never cancel each other out” (de Man 161). The continual textual process of creation and demolition of signification is not a means to itself, but rather, in Barthes’ words, a “*subtle subversion*” which evades the binarism destruction/construction and “seeks some *other* term: a third term, which is not, however, a synthesizing term but an eccentric, extraordinary term” (Barthes 1975 55). A new text between the binarism construction/destruction arises, hence Brooke-Rose’s assertion, “I’m not destroying the text [...] I’m creating a new one” (Hayman and Cohen 4).

Thru has been defined a “journey into a universe of discourse” (Berressem 104). Its multi-metaphorical title seems to indicate both a space which can be entered into and exited from. The work becomes an access, a opening path, a passageway to the text, but also an outlet, a way out of the crisis and into the text, an exit *into* the mirror and *from* it. Indeed, as already observed, the terms *text* and *exit* are a basic pattern throughout the novel. They combine together to form a peculiar palindromic cross – “(t)ex(i)t” (T 690) – and offer, in its very last page an “exit *thru* [the] text”,

T
E
X
(I)
U Я H T H R U (T 742)

Thru presents an exit to the much suffered debate over the ontological status of language, an exit which can only be through itself and into itself. The way out of the pessimistic notion of language is offered through language itself and its incessant, delirious play of signifiers which offers countless interpretative possibilities and counters closure.

It is easy to see now how the main “paratext” of the novel – its title – is subject to the same proliferation of meaning which the whole text embodies: from the “looking back and through” of the mirror, with its inference in terms of

psychoanalytic practice (Lacan's subject which can look forward only by looking back), to its intertextual implications (reflecting other texts through itself), to the idea of "seeing through the text" and its metalinguistic function, or the process of going through it which seems to be also a suggestion in terms of active reading practice. The term *thru* could also allude to the fact that a text is made up of language and must be computed through language, as well as at the fact that the recuperation of the joy for/of language must pass *through* language.

In light of what has been considered above, the repeatedly asked question "who speaks?" seems to find a distinct answer. In fact, if we asked "*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?*" (Genette 1980 186), we will have to say that in *Thru* focalization is blurred and for ever shifting. Since the narrating instance reflects the consciousnesses' perceptions but unreflectively, the characters are strictly and objectively limited to their focal position. What Genette calls an absolute "internal focalization [...] where the central character is limited absolutely to – and strictly inferred from – his focal position alone" (Genette 1980 193), is further developed by Brooke-Rose in that she multiplies the characters and passes from one focal point to another without the reader being able to distinguish between them (if not by means of the context or by means of information which is mostly disclosed afterwards). In *Thru*, the focalization of the narrative shifts continuously, generating an infinite blurring which results in a reaffirmation of the fictional illusion as fictional. However, the absolutely internal focalization seems to be that of discourse itself, which reflects, again objectively, the discourse on and within itself. So that the point of view which seems to orient the whole narrative perspective would be language's, discourse's: *narration itself* seems to speak and reflect on its own textual procedures,

let alone all that stuff about scene and summary point of view and the narrator explicit implicit privileged unprivileged reliable unreliable etc., true of course but quite simply non-pertinent, impertinent in fact since point of view *is* discourse and what matter is → are the innumerable and ever escaping levels of Utterance by the I who is not the I who says I. (T 630-1)

If any trace of narrator disappears, the main, subtending narrator becomes narration itself: discourse is both the "narrating I" and the "narrated I" (Genette 1980 252), the point of view is that of *la parole*. *Thru* seems "to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs'" (Barthes 1977 143), thus embodying Flaubert's idea of "*un livre sur rien*", the ideal book which holds up through pure force of style and

structure. The same author declares, “my characters emerge out of language [...] I think it was Yeats who spoke about poetry coming out of a mouthful of air” (Turner 1990b 26).

In a text where “it is impossible to attribute an origin, a point of view, to the statement”, where “any reference is impossible”, “the discourse, or better, the language, speaks: nothing more” (Barthes 1974 41).

Chapter 6

The Author is dead:

long live the author, the reader and the characters

If *Thru* solves the tension over the status of language as linked to reality by means of what has been considered above, another major source of anxiety generated by the literary debate of the time the text addresses is the question of the death of the author and the ontological status of fictional characters.

The dispute *mimesis* vs. *narration* – between Narrative Mode (“telling”, authorial guidance in NS, narrative sentences) and Speech Mode (“showing”, speech or thought by characters) – already addressed by Plato in his *Republic*, renewed at the beginning of the twentieth century, producing an intense debate from the sixties all the way through the seventies and the eighties. The focus shifted from the author’s intention (Jakobson’s Sender, emotive function) to the reader’s interpretation (Receiver, conative function) *via* the text itself (Message, poetic function). “*Telling*” and “*showing*” became respectively “the Ormazd and the Ahriman of novelistic aesthetics” (Genette 1980 163), leading to the rejection of the author’s presence in the text. The conventional concept of author who shows the events from his/her own perspective and mediates the narration collapsed. Clearly, it had become impossible to think of a modern work where the author intervened personally (Manzoni-type) to give his viewpoint on the events or characters, let alone morally judging them.

In her essay “The Vanishing Author” (1961), Brooke-Rose commented on the “invisibility” of the author in the modern novel. In the same year, the same issue was extensively tackled by Booth, who coined the term “ideal reader” (Booth 1961). However, Barthes’s declaration of the death of the author (1968) was very much acclaimed as representing a turning point in the development of the dispute. The author was *utterly* dismissed from the text and the reader was given *supreme* power over it, later variously labelled as “super reader” (Riffaterre 1971), or “implied reader” (Iser 1974).

The old conventional author had vanished from the modern text for obvious reasons, but what went “overlooked” in the course of the dispute was the basic distinction between *death* and *invisibility*, and the even more basic distinction

between real, actual author (the one in flesh and blood) and implied, encoded author (the narrating instance). The initial “invisibility” became total disregard for the implied, encoded author, which is the indispensable narrative construct of a text. The dispute around the concepts of mimesis and narration was brought to extreme conclusions: many critics “forgot” that “mimesis” means “making one forget that it is the narrator telling” (Genette 1980 166), as opposed to a total absence of the narrating instance.

In other words, the dispute went “a little too far” in the extreme situation of complete authority of the reader over the text. The basic end-result was that “if the reader’s reading is supreme, anything goes, from pluralistic chaos [...] through five different possible reactions all the way to complete skepticism: there is no truth, all is relative, individual” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 30).

Brooke-Rose’s stance is indeed to be found along a more “balanced” access road to the text. Opting for what she defines “a safe buffer state called The Text as Object, an apparently autonomous unit that encodes both its author (implied), or addresser, and its reader (implied), or addressee” (Brooke-Rose 1980 120), she distinguishes between the “real” and the “implied” author/reader, which she labels respectively “actual” and “encoded”. She then tries to re-balance the reader’s power explaining that “The implied reader is pure theory” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 18), and that the individual reading should not be confused with the text, “we literary people find it difficult not to confuse “our” reading, enriched with those of others, with the text” (Brooke-Rose 1980 121).

Although the author’s intentions are not to be taken as the main path leading to the text, and although “the author doesn’t begin to exist without the reader” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 29), Brooke-Rose dismisses the death of the author and stresses the difference between death and invisibility. At the same time, she recasts the concept of “implied reader” in a different light. She explains that if the reader’s interpretation must be valued, it is nevertheless fundamental that the reader be prepared to read attentively: the communicative functions which Jakobson posits between Sender and Receiver – Context, Message, Contact, and Code (Cf. Jakobson 1967) – cannot be overlooked by the reader who interprets a text. In a text as safe buffer state, elucidates Brooke-Rose, the *encoded* author determines the encoded reader by means

of the structures encoded in the text. The encoded reader is not the actual reader, no less than the encoded author is the actual author, but the structures encoded in the text contribute to determine the way the actual reader is brought to feel about it. Far from meaning that readers can read *whatever they want* into the text, their analysis and interpretation must necessarily start from *the text as object* (Cf. Brooke-Rose 2002b 28-31). Referring to Barthes' five narrative codes (Cf. *S/Z* 18-20), Brooke-Rose explains how they can be either overdetermined, underdetermined or nondetermined, producing as an effect the way the reader is encoded in the text: as "hypo-critical" in the case of overdetermination, as "hypercritical" in the opposite case (Brooke-Rose 1980 131, 134). However, a balance between under and over determination of codes is necessary for the narrative "to retain its hold over us, its peculiar mixture of recognition-pleasure and mystery" (Brooke-Rose 1980 131).

In order to understand what kind of encoded reader Brooke-Rose's text postulates, it is thus necessary to consider the way over and underdetermination of codes functions in it. In *Thru*, the balance between over and underdetermination – between "giving" and "taking away" – functions first of all within the same code. The hermeneutic code for instance is both over and underdetermined: clues to the enigmas posited are clearly given in the text, but each clue is punctually recast into doubt, blurred by means of its peculiar doubting language. Moreover, the information which the text seems at one point to be clearly giving is later on represented by means of slightly varied repetitions, which instead of expanding on it, produce further blur. The apparent overdetermination results in confusion and underdetermination, so that we talk of "overdetermined enigma[s] unresolved" (Brooke-Rose 1980 142). The text clearly raises questions that demand explication, but promptly frustrates the revelation of truth by giving "no reference or too many" (T 678). The end-result is that "overdetermination functions, paradoxically, as underdetermination" (Brooke-Rose 1980 135) and the hermeneutic gap is left open.

The same counterbalance of over and underdetermination is to be found in the proairetic code. If, on the one hand, the constant transgression of diegetic levels underdetermines the code, on the other hand, the fictionality of the whole narrative edifice is overtly stated and therefore overdetermined. This provides the minimum balance the reader needs to *hold* onto the narrative and produces metatextual tension.

The semantic, symbolic and cultural codes are interrelated to each other, again in a movement of over and underdetermination. If the semantic and the symbolic are overdetermined by means of the use of language as a creative tool, always capable to give life to different or unexpected connotations of meaning, they are also underdetermined by the endless process of destruction of meaning which follows construction. The cultural code is linked to the use of quotations and specialized discourse. However, if the references to extra literary theories and knowledge is posited, it is also reworked into poetry: the object of discourse is primarily language and its construction/destruction power, rather than those theories.

The skilful equilibrium of over and under-determination in *Thru* gives life to an intricate structure which at first produces dizziness in the reader: the text gives and holds back at the same time. The anagrams presented in the text are an exemplary illustration of its balance between over and underdetermination. Anagrams must be hidden to be such, but also hinted at to be discovered, hence the function of bold capitals, which make curiosity arise in the readers and stimulate their participation. The reader of *Thru* is not overencoded as hypocrite (must not be insulted in his intelligence), but also not highly underencoded (he will withdraw or read whatever he wants in the text): the novel *calls for* his interpretation. Despite the initial confusion, the apparently non-structured balance turns out to be perfectly equilibrated and mostly engaging, intriguing.

When we read, “All access forbidden except for Prepared Consumers with special permits from the Authorities” (T 629), we realise that *Thru* is a book “to be entered into”, in the sense that the reader loses his traditional external position and is called to participate actively in the “making” of textuality, for only “from the inside”, only “by experiencing it [...] a full understanding of the fictional process can be gained” (Grant 15). Brooke-Rose’s reader has to be a “prepared consumer”. In *Thru*, not only is complicity with the reader sought, as theorised by Barthes, but also the reader’s convention of trusting the narrator, of relying on him/her, is played upon. One of the principles of the novel is in fact that of “never allowing the stock response to materialize in fact. The moment the reader feels secure, you just make him think again” (Hayman and Cohen 8). Indeed, while teasingly suggesting “work it out for

yourself it's not very deep" (T 595), the text also warns, "The reader has to be prepared for the undecidable" (T 608)¹⁴.

Thru thus is a dialogical, ambiguous work where over and underdetermination perfectly balance each other and produce tension in the reader's mind. In this way, the text points primarily in the direction of an answer, it anticipates, provokes an answer. As Bakhtin saw, in a dialogic novel "the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated" (Bakhtin 280). If it is the intentionality of the speaker which differentiates and stratifies language, it is the consciousness of the listener, its response, which is its "activating principle" (Bakhtin 282). Brooke-Rose's text counts on an active, responsive understanding which "establishes a series of complex interrelationships [...] with the word and enriches it with new elements" (Bakhtin 282), bringing forth the possible connotations of meaning. Jakobson's phatic and conative functions are both present: establishing the contact and acting on the receiver is what the narrator (narration) aims at, opening up a dialogue with the reader.

However, Brooke-Rose adventures further in the line of the game between author and reader, in that it is their very relationship to be simultaneously over and underdetermined, thus inscribing her multi-complex work into the debate over reader and author fallacies in a highly original way, and contributing to clarify concepts which had become misleading in literary criticism.

On the one hand, in fact, *Thru* seems to implement Barthes's idea that "the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity" (Barthes 1975 27). The text kills the author, recalling Lewis Carroll's Queen of hearts' words: "There is no more private property in writing, the author is dead, the spokesman, the porte-parole, the tale bearer, off with his head [...] the text slowly forms itself" (T 607). Defining itself "the text that kills the head that brought it forth" (T 685), the novel mimes the death of the author and to a certain extent the technique of the modernist author who looks at narration from a distance and does not intrude

¹⁴ The wrong spelling of the term "undecidable" – both here and on page 637 – seems a further way of stimulating the readers' ability to read, as well as of playing with their expectations. Indeed, there are many examples of misspelling throughout the text, another one of which is "mannikin" or "mannikins" (T 702, 685).

into the story: whoever invents the characters seems in fact to withdraw, “indifferent, paring [his/her] fingernails” (T 604-5). Indeed, further developing the modernist technique – where the author disappears to let his characters express their perceptions *reflexively* – *Thru* reproduces events and characters’ perceptions *unreflexively*, as if the text only reported things as just being there. The author is invisible in the narrative in the sense that “there is no consciousness that these various discourses are being filtered through” (Hayman and Cohen 8). Mimesis, therefore, or better the mimesis of mimesis, is total because of the apparent absence of a narrator and because of the scientific present tense, which renders utmost immediacy.

On the other hand, however, *Thru* paradoxically subverts the much contested diegesis/mimesis dichotomy as it continuously alludes to its own fictionality. Moreover, not only is the very absence of an author humorously presented and constantly played upon by means of countless allusions to its death, but also and most importantly the (implied) author which disappears from the nature of things (it is absent in the sense that it does not intervene to judge or explain), is ambiguously reinstated in the text by means of several references to a mysterious figure which continually appears and disappears, a “mad magician” (T 582) who creates the fictional illusion, a “black magician who fantastically juggles luminous hoops in the retro-rectangular” (T 582) mirror, variously disguised as a “white white rabbit”, “a jack-in-the-box”, which regularly turns up and hides again,

My love is like a white white rabbit		
		late
down the hatch		
	out of sight	
	dead	(safe)
earthhole though		
il court il court le furet		
and which way did he go?		
thattaway		
hey follow that car		
you should have seen the one that got		away
	that always gets	away
		safe
as a jack-in-the-box		
sitting beside		
hiding behind		
eyeing beneath		
the grey eminence the retro-vizir beyond the in/con sultan		
Hearer of deep structures below the performance. (T 581)		

Like Alice's "white white rabbit", the fictional illusion flees "down the hatch out of sight". The "late" rabbit is parenthetically "(safe)" and we are told we "should have seen the one that got away that always gets away safe". The rabbit in fact reappears a few pages later from the hat of a "short and fat [...] magician" (T 587). Throughout the text, we are constantly reminded of the fact that the fictive illusion is created under "the expert guidance of the lanky hencheminence grise in smoked glasses" (T 672), "the vizir looming grey eminence behind the consultan listener" (T 580).

These mysterious figures which are intermittently glimpsed at through the narration seem to play on Barthes' statement that "The writer is always on the blind spot of systems, adrift; he is the joker in the pack, a *mana*, a zero degree, the dummy in the bridge game: necessary to the meaning (the battle), but himself deprived of fixed meaning" (Barthes 1975 35). If Barthes saw that "lost in the mist of a text (not *behind* it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author" (Barthes 1975 27), in *Thru* these figures continuously appear from behind as the juggling hoops of the fictional illusion do.

By means of these enigmatic figures, the novel seems to hint at its encoded author who, although invisible, it is nevertheless present and *must* be present if narration is there. Even if the author does not speak directly, it appears in disguise to let the reader catch a glimpse of its presence behind narration. It is the showman of a puppet-theatre who controls the scene without being seen, the "poor Yorik / [...] dead / Safe" (T 725), "the short plump demagogue [who] having carefully prepared the agenda for the manoeuvring of the meeting sit quietly clothed in democracy" (T 602). *Thru*'s "very subtly planned chaos" (T 592) is thus supervised and manoeuvred by the encoded author.

In the midst of the debate over the supposed death of the author, *Thru* mockingly enacts its death, recasting the whole dispute in ironical light and recuperating its role as *necessary* narrative construct. Far from being dead, the author is engaging in a play of hide and seek with the reader, clearly explaining that "Whoever speaks is hiding behind a discourse that is not theirs" (T 677).

The text is evidently not only seeking active participation of the reader, but inscribing this into an ethic of playfulness, playing a cat-and-mouse game with her

reader, an “eternal game of vinciperdi” (T 675), clearly postulating this relationship (“you should have seen the one who always gets away safe”) and mocking the reader directly: “Qui parle avec un noyau dans la bouche? You’re taking a long time have I given you food for thought?” (T 723).

As Genette explains, “the narrative discourse [...] depends absolutely on that action of telling [...] Without a narrating act, therefore, there is no statement” (Genette 1980 26). If the narrative action which produces the statement must be there, even if invisible, in *Thru*, the reason for this invisibility is overtly addressed. As the text makes clear, although “once upon a time [...] the author had supreme authority” (T 605), today’s situation is completely different,

the community assumes both roles, emitting and receiving a discourse it addresses to itself, indeed, the community is the discourse, existing by, through and for its myth, not before or after [...] you see not narrator for the reasons just given. The element of manipulation however should not be too visible, for it destroys the fictive illusion, making the recipient over-aware of a technique at work thus losing eye-contact. (T 606)

In order for the fictional illusion not to vanish, the magician must operate at the reader’s back and the latter, who can look at the “luminous coloured hoops” (T 622) he juggles only through the rear-view mirror, cannot turn his/her head without the former vanishing: “Don’t look back Orpheus don’t look back” (T 669).

If every narration presupposes a narrating instance which, however invisible, is not dead, Barthes’ concept of the death of the author is ironically addressed during a class debate by the teacher and one of the students,

But what about the clarity of the message?

You read what you want into it.

I see. And what do you read?

It’s not for me to say, I wrote it.

But the reader is the writer and the writer the reader. (T 608)

In contrast to the contemporary tendency to dispossess the author of its authority and to give the reader supreme power over the text, the question of the death of the author is humorously recast. If the reader is the writer, it follows that the writer is the reader and therefore can read what he wants into the text: a paradoxical, unsustainable situation. The reader must participate actively in the text, “The Text [...] asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (Barthes 1977 163), but not in the sense that he/she is its supreme interpreter, while the author is not to be taken into consideration, but rather in that there should be a balance between the two fallacies,

which are both important for narration and literary criticism. In this light, the following excerpt acquires significant connotations,

E se non è vero, if it has all been dreamt up by the markster of the moment you can always drop into a lacuna, entering a busy beehive through a little hole where you execute a secret ballet with a show of legs and a quiver of wings for a swarm of honeyvoracious impulses that palp oscult measure and imitate the message sucking the performer dry with no memory of the fact that the message has been transmitted from [...] a fat queen bhi, quivering now and again in apathy from fear of being

unthroned
undroned?

(T 674)

The text compares itself to a beehive where the reader has to interpret the “message” of the author, the “queen bhi”,¹⁵ entangling the secrets of narration and enjoying the show that the author has put on for him/her, with the danger of “sucking the performer dry”, of forgetting “the fact that the message has been transmitted from [...] a fat queen bhi”, i.e. of not taking into account the emitter of the message, its encoded author, who is thus afraid (“quivering”) of being disregarded (“unthroned”) by the reader, his/her message remaining unexpressed/unuttered (“undroned”). *Thru* thus postulates both a critical, encoded reader and an encoded author, both of them being not the ones living in a “real” world outside the text, but mere effects of the play of writing, critical constructs necessary to the narrative economy and which therefore cannot be abstracted from when interpreting a text.

The author/reader dialectic is postulated in *Thru* as an exchange based on effort on the reader’s part who gains a reward in measure of his endeavour, “Literature is an object of exchange [...] as to the internal principles of exchange with what the receptor is prepared to give and take, not just in money but in effort and reward” (T 628). Inversely, on the reader’s effort depends the very life of the encoded author and narration. If the encoded author is the necessary narrative instance of fictionality – the one who *must be living if narrating* but also *must narrate in order to live* – his life primarily depends on the reader. This concept is perfectly expressed by the sentence, “Narration is life and I am Scheherezade” (T 711). Brooke-Rose has always been fascinated by this peculiar figure, As she comes back to it in other novels, among which *Textermination*. Scheherezade is both the archetype of the narrator and a fictional character, “whose very life is to narrate and whose narration

¹⁵ The presence of the author could also be hinted at by the fact the comments to the creative writing homework is in Brooke-Rose’s own handwriting. Moreover, the “bhi” of the “queen bhi” could also stand for the initial letter of the author’s surname.

gives her life, with every new character in the same situation, not a character but a tale-bearer, whose life also depends on his narration” (T 618). As a narrator, Scheherezade is “under perpetual sentence” (T 581) of death. To say it in Barth’s humorous terms, her “problem” is “to publish or perish” (Barth 1967 33). She is always caught up between the difficulties which narration implies and the threat of execution in case her story will not result interesting enough to her listener. Like Scheherezade, the encoded author will not live unless his/her narrative is appreciated.

Once again the threat of death – here of the author as critical construct – is evoked and enacted in order to be avoided.

Apart from recasting the roles of author and reader and the importance of narrative life, the movement of hide and seek which the implied author of *Thru* enacts seems to address once again Derrida’s theory, deconstructing the dichotomy presence/absence and the notion of origin which lies at its basis.

The notion of writing, trace, grammè, disrupts the notion of author as transcendental signifier of a text: language withdraws from the subject and signification functions independently. Origin is a trace, already there and for ever eluded, deferring and differing. Yet the “responsibility” of écriture is reinstated by Derrida as trace which produces the movement of signification, “Even before it is linked to incision, engraving, drawing, or the letter, [...] the concept of the *graphie* [...] implies the framework of the *instituted trace*, as the possibility common to all systems of signification” (Derrida 1976 46). Écriture is the ability to differentiate and defer.

Brooke-Rose enacts this dialectic and marks the presence of the author, its presence as “trace” (both origin and nonorigin) of the text and the responsibility of writing. The binarism author/reader is not subverted in the sense that the author regains full power over the narrative as opposed to the reader, but in the sense that it is in between these two terms that lies *the text as trace of both the author and reader*.

If the system of speech as presence which dominates our culture “has produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside” (Derrida 1976 8), *Thru* mimes the deconstructive strategy and subverts the dichotomy absence/presence. The endless shifting movement of meaning which writing entails

is mimed to the extreme (overenacted, overdetermined) by means of the continual allusion to the mysterious figure of the author (the fictional illusion) which constantly hides and reappears in disguise from a different corner. Arche-trace is something which *is* but cannot be pinned down once and for all, it remains in indeterminacy, in proliferation of meaning. Origin is always already inscribed in the text and yet displaced, non-recognisable. There is no outside origin of the text, as determined presence, everything is inscribed within and outside it: everything begins in *différance*, with its differing and deferring actions. The author, like meaning, like “the eternal presence and absence of signifiers that characterizes the practice of language” (T 675) is always already there yet absent. It is a trace, a *différance*. The author is both present and absent from the narrative.

As Derrida explains, writing is the name of two absences, “the absence of the signatory [...] and the absence of the referent” (Derrida 1976 40-1). The present tense in *Thru* inscribes in itself the absence of the presence-to-self. With its “scientific” use, Brooke-Rose aims at restoring the authority of *écriture*, and the *trace*, the authority of the author, its authenticity and responsibility, the authority of the “author” as absence which generates meaning and the absence of the reader which interprets it. Brooke-Rose writing in *Thru* is mostly in speech form but without implying the superiority of the speech form, the importance of the “real presence”. Against “the supposed superiority of speech (because of its ‘real presence’)”, Brooke-Rose effort is directed “to restore the authority or “scientific” (narratorless) neutrality of narrative *écriture*”, to provide both “that breathy orality *and* the ‘trace,’ the ‘authority’ of the author, the authenticity of the source, the responsibility of *écriture*” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 158). *Thru* reinstates the “self-presence in the breath” (Derrida 1976 26) of the speaker, but not the importance of the speech form over writing.

The novel subverts the speech/writing binarism: the “voice” is shown to be no real presence (deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence), the narrative is narratorless, yet Barthes’ grain of the voice is present: a writing which is not speech, but rather a “mixture of timbre and language”, a “*writing aloud* [which] is not phonological but phonetic [...] the language lined with flesh [...] the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal

stereophony”, a writing which succeeds in “shifting the signified a great distance” (Barthes 1975 66-67).

Writing becomes “the relation between life and death, between present and representation [...] writing is the stage of history and the play of the world”. Representation is “death [...] But it is bound to life and to the living present which it repeats originally” (Derrida 2001 287, 286).

The tension of the debate around the author/reader is postulated, performed and resolved through the textual ethics of *playfulness*. As theorised by Barthes, “the text itself *plays*” (Barthes 1977 162). Its game aims first of all at recuperating the joy of reading/writing, the importance of narration, offering an exit to the debate which menaces it. Brooke-Rose herself stresses the importance of enjoying literature without being entrapped into a “rigidly held theory” which threatens to kill its play, explaining that the reader should approach the text with enthusiasm,

enthusing about a necessarily chameleon text and transmitting that enthusiasm without killing the chameleon through summary, ideology, a rigidly held theory, or imposition of abstract structures that have only a limited relevance to any text, using [...] this or that theory if it can enhance understanding, but above all, genuine enjoyment, insight, imagination, a “gift outright” of ourselves, and the compliment of careful reading. (Brooke-Rose 2002b 35)

Let us now consider the role of the characters/narrators in *Thru*, what their status implies in terms of the concept of identity and their relation with the author, the reader and the same text.

For compound reasons the round, flesh-and-blood characters – the ones who retained a strong mimetic power on the reader and with which the reader identified – have disappeared from the modern novel.

Among the causes which have contributed to make characters lose their mimetic illusion is that the novelistic genre has lost its representational task together with the crumbling of bourgeois society – which the novel was born to depict (Cf. Watt 2001). At the same time, comics, the media, computer games and popular genres have gained new relevance, strongly contributing to the predominant flat characterisation. Another major cause of this situation is that the horror of wars and the savagery of reality have outdone imagination, so that mimesis has become unable to cope with reality and has become silent in front of it. (Cf. Brooke-Rose 1986 193).

Finally, the crisis of language and representation has revealed characters to be only “verbal structures”, mere letters, verbal constructs made up through codes of

representation, the convergence of selected semes upon a proper name (Cf. Barthes 1974 67-8), so that the illusion they once generated “now lies in pieces at our feet, like a disassembled toy, together with the novel as we commonly understand that term” (Brooke-Rose 1986 186-7).

If the “Fictional Character has died, or become flat, as had *deus ex machina*” (Brooke-Rose 1986 193), and if readers have lost the illusion once created by characters, have stopped identifying with them, what we need – comments Brooke-Rose – is a “deep-down regeneration in the novel and, therefore, as *sine qua non*, of character in the novel” (Brooke-Rose 1986 196).

In *Thru*, Brooke-Rose seems not only to face this problem directly, but also to try to solve such a degrading situation, offering her characters the “deep-down regeneration” she postulates as essential to the renewal of the novelistic genre.

The characters of *Thru* are shown to be conscious of the present state of things. They are fully aware of being merely “words on a page” and know that one of the reasons why they cannot be conventionally rounded characters is that “*The bourgeois i-dyll is o-o-o-ver*” (T 672). Armel seems even to steal the author’s own words: if Brooke-Rose explains that “rounded individuation has become an addition, like the ornaments of traditional rhetoric [and] At best the characters are poems in themselves” (Brooke-Rose 1986 192), Armel tells Larissa, “we were a poem not a couple” (T 654).

If characters have been shown to be only “verbal constructs”, Larissa is said to be “a well established structure that presupposes a void a fall into a delirious discourse watched indifferently through fingernails paring” (T 695). Similarly, if Brooke-Rose explains that “Identity [...] is a fiction, made of language, and, like all good fictions, is open-ended and slightly unreal” (Brooke-Rose 2002b 60), in *Thru* identity is humorously shown to be a fictional construct as many times the text plays on the notion of portrait to show how a portrait cannot possibly capture an identity which does not exist. For instance, an academic candidate’s *curriculum vitae* is presented in the novel: his name is “Homo Scholasticus” (T 616), he was born in the middle of the 4th millennium B.C., educated in Memphis, Babylon, Hao, Rome, Athens, Iona and finally at the “New World University”. He has been teaching many disciplines, among which Rhetoric in Syracuse (where Rhetoric was born), creative

telling in Baghdad (where the story of Scheherezade takes place), nail-paring in Dublin (Joyce), and Dialectics in Athens. However— reinstates the text – such a portrait “captures nothing”, being only an “exact replicas of all such replicas” (T 617-8). Apart from being an ironical comment to the academic recruitment system, such a curriculum seems to show how identity is only made up of “words on a page”. Similarly, the text parallels two portraits of Armel, one made by Veronica and the other created by Armel himself (T 591): the great difference between the two descriptions seems to signify that identity only corresponds to one’s own perception and not to the “reality” of things. These portraits are followed by the “Portrait of the portrait by Jacques le Fataliste” and by the “Portrait of the portrait by Roland Barthes”, after which Jacques reinstates – with a direct quotation from Diderot – that such portraits “ressemblent si peu, que, si par hazard on vient à rencontrer les originaux, on ne les reconnait pas” (T 591).

The continuous metalepses of *Thru* make its characters continually shift identities into undecidability. The discourses which multiply around each character show that identity itself is a fiction invented by each of them for the other, in an endless movement of interpretation. If the deconstructive strategy that Derrida hypothesises is a strategy for reading texts, what we have in *Thru* is a continuous miming of this process as every character reads the others as texts and is read in turn by them. In this way, the novel subverts the notion of fixed identity as linked to the idea of a universal and essential truth as origin of meaning. Its characters bear in themselves their self-decentering, the deconstruction of their own identity.

The process of destruction of the notion of fixed identity however is not a means to itself. As we have already observed, initial subversion is enacted in order to achieve – on an inverse ladder – new life. Brooke-Rose’s characters in fact, challenging any coercive imposition of fixed identity, overcome their dependence on the system of preset meaning. Once the notion of fixed meaning is challenged, the idea of conventionally depicted rounded characters which are the bearers of universal, eternal meaning is shown to be no longer a feasible one. If readers are made aware of the fact that “everything is text” and that identity and fixed meaning are only tropes, and if they accept the open proliferation of meaning which lies at the basis of existence, they will necessarily reconsider their notion of the “reality” a

character stands for. They will recognise that characters can no longer embody eternal verities, since the very concept of eternal verity is a misleading one.

But the process of renewal of the characters in *Thru* does not stop here. They also achieve new life by means of the dialectic which is postulated at the basis of their mutual relationships and which is generated by the Lacanian dialectic of desire which conceives a lack at the heart of the ego and a narcissistic bond between subject/object. If psychoanalysis has revealed the lack at the heart of human existence, a way of renewing the characters in the novel is precisely to make them aware of this lack, to show how desire subtends their relationships, so that they embody the condition of the modern human being.

What is even more significant, the Lacanian dialectic of desire also engenders the relationship between characters, author, reader and text. In other words, all the instances which literature entails – author, reader, characters and text – are made to enter into a complex bond of interdependence with one another, at the basis of which is the mirror stage and castration, the impossibility of fulfilment of desire and the concept of language as mirror and absence.

For Lacan, the object of desire is constituted for the child in the very moment it is lost, in the moment the perceived unity of the mirror stage vanishes with the entrance of the subject into the symbolic. If desire exists only because of this initial loss, any object of desire from this moment on will be such only in as much it stands for this loss. The Lacanian subject is thus “a being that can only conceptualise itself when it is mirrored back to itself from the position of another’s desire” (Mitchell and Rose 5-6). Desire, generated by the castration complex, is the desire of a “lack in the Other”, therefore essentially unattainable, an infinite deferral, for ever eluded.

At the heart of desire is therefore a *méconnaissance* of fullness: it is lack that ensures desire. However, because the *objet petit a*, the object of our desire, is ultimately nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections, to come too close to it threatens to give us the experience of the Lacanian Gaze, the realisation that behind our desire is nothing but our lack: the materiality of the Real staring back at us. The lack at the heart of desire simultaneously allows desire to persist and continually recalls us the threat of the Real.

In *Thru*, the relationships delineated between the characters of opposite sexes continually reflect the lack at the heart of the subject/object and are governed by the castration complex. The novel takes up Lacan's theory many times, explaining how "in the dialectic of desire, the subject is subverted and the object is from the start an object of central loss" (T 594), and describing the mechanism of the "axis of desire" (T 700). For instance, in the context of Stavro's love declaration to Larissa we read,

The unmarked term, scaring, scarring you with his zero, forming you to his pygmalion desire that realises retrospectively that it has worked at something infinitely beyond itself since the diagonal contradictory of the dialectical reply to I want to take you over must necessarily be I want to overtake you whatever the deep structure. How long O Freud how long? (T 681)

The desire of appropriation of the loved-object by the lover-subject is also reinstated later on as we read that Stavro's words "I want to look after you" only mean "I want to take you over" (T 701). What Larissa – shown to be aware of the process which generates desire – significantly replies is: "With all your goodly words you me endow [...] But if you distance yourself you see only the mannikin ensconced still in his mother's lap like an open grave a circular O" (T 702)¹⁶. Larissa will later explain that Stavro is unconsciously "knocking at the other place both his and mine without even realizing it" (T 711), "He's aiming at someone else through me though he doesn't know it" (T 712).

Similarly, when Stavro proposes to Larissa, his words reveal his desire to attain his "unity" by possessing a woman, "my life's a mess, but with you, I know, I just know it will all come right" (T 703). Soon after, Larissa meets Armel-ex-husband who tries to win her back and together they discuss Stavro: Larissa says she knows he is only affected by castration and Armel defines Larissa "a toy he [Stavro] will discard as soon as given" (T 708, 709). However, Armel punctually declares "I want to save you" (T 709), thus showing he is caught up in the same egotistic mechanism of appropriation.

If for Lacan castration "means that jouissance must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder [...] of the Law of desire" (Lacan 1989 324), the desire for conquest in man is shown to be an attempt to solve his castration complex,

¹⁶ This concept also recalls Genette as he explains that "the view I have of a picture depends for precision on the distance separating me from it" (Genette 1980 162). The same idea of distancing oneself to better see the whole picture is repeated other times throughout the text in reference to literature and narrative illusion. Here the idea seems to hint at the fact that love, like fiction, is based on illusion: if you look at the fiction from too near, you do not see its illusion, but if you distance yourself enough, you can clearly distinguish it.

his incompleteness, “the Don Juan myth – the symbolic structure of which has long been analysed as that of castration, that of a man marked with the sign of incompleteness” (T 636).

The characters of *Thru* exist in a mutual relationship of interdependence generated by castration, as is exemplified by the continual process of reciprocal invention we have observed above. Indeed, Larissa and Armel are said to be invented respectively by their “binary” man and woman (Cf. T 659, 669), and when Armel calls Larissa “castrating bitch”, she charges him in turn, “you’re destroying me, my image of myself I mean, as, reflected, by you” (T 654). Again, when the two argue, the well-known Lacanian question “Che vuoi?” jumps back from one to the other,

But what do you want?
Ah! Che vuoi? (654)

One of them also significantly states, “we can’t eat each other without becoming each other can we. Let the phallos perceive its aim” (T 661), and when Larissa declares to love Armel’s head, he replies “O Salome do you want it on a platter then?” (T 661). Love is castrating, it entails the process of killing each other, as each one wants to appropriate the other for oneself, as Lacan illuminatingly explains, “*I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than / You – the object petit a – I mutilate you*” (Lacan 1991 263).

Each possible narrator of *Thru* “does not exist except as reinvestment itself perpetually reinvesting S into O the Other Place and o the object of desire $o^1 o^2 o^n$ ” (T 689). Each narrator is perpetually reinvesting his Subject into the Other (*Autre*) and into the object of desire (*autre, object petit a*) which multiplies *ad infinitum*. What the text presents and enacts is a radical and mutual usurpation of selves, since the dialectic of desire brings about the wish to appropriate the other for oneself (Cf. Lacan 1989 307-8). The mutual enslavement which occurs at all levels is a struggle of prestige of which the stake is life itself.

The theme of castration, in *Thru*, is inextricably connected to language and its use. As Brooke-Rose elucidates, “The moment we utter a sentence, we’re leaving out a lot. [...] We’re doing a *découpage* of reality” (Hayman and Cohen 11). The idea the novel seems to put forward is precisely that of language as castration of reality, together with the idea of castration in human relationships. To speak is to limit/omit/castrate reality, for when we speak we automatically take some bits of

reality and leave out others. The same happens in human relationships: we castrate the Other by means of language. When the characters of *Thru* invent each other, they are castrating each other: Brooke-Rose's characters are *paper Is*, but also *paper eyes*, "papyrus eye[s]" (T 584). Apart from playing on Barthes' declaration that "the *I* which writes the text [...] is never more than a paper-*I*" (Barthes 1977 161), *Thru*'s paper *Is* are reduced to passive receptacles for the projection of each other's fantasies. They demonstrate that the desire for the mastery of the look is continually undercut by a certain castration at the heart of the locus/narrative: the fictional "reality" is an illusion created by a double mirroring movement. Castration of one's self in human relationships and castration of reality in language are interdependent, as interdependent are Armel and Larissa by means both of their relationship and of language – their anagrammatic names.

The mirroring movement acts in human relations by means of language. In the text, the characters are mutually dependent on each other because language acts as a mirror. They establish a specular relationship with each other by means of language. When they speak, language sends them back their own image and desire. Desire, however, cannot be spoken, and the novel jokingly addresses this impossibility as we read "your demand cannot reach its destination" (T 685) or else "Votre demande is not an askable question" (T 675). *Thru* applies the notions of desire and lack to discourse and narration when we read that "eyelessness is not a provisional state but a structure, a blind spot in your own youdipeon discourse and discourse only occurs insofar as there is a lack of (in) sight" (T 675). Discourse can occur only insofar as there is lack of sight which generates the fictional illusion; a fictional structure entails "eyelessness" – lack of sight – which is constituent of the illusion. In fiction in fact, "intensity of illusion is what matters to whoever is operating through a flaw in the glass" (T 698), and the awareness of this illusion generates disillusionment,

if you come too close to any icon [...] you will see only the texture and the knife strokes [...] If however you distance yourself [...] you see merely an oval with a blob off-centre which [...] splits into dancing hoops [...] juggled by an invisible magician. (T 687-8)

Aware of this mechanism, *Thru* overenacts it and generates illusion through its own subversion, by clearly addressing and endlessly referring to the "optical illusion" (T 697) it breeds. Furthermore, "eyelessness" can be read as *I lessness*, *lack of I*, the lack the humanistic notion of ego as a unitary subject. Language is a

structure which reveals this lack, the empty space beyond. Indeed in the novel the “fall” into language and the empty space beyond it is mimed also by means of the peculiar sentence structure, where each discourse incessantly leads to another till it collapses into the void. Larissa is shown to perceive this emptiness as she states, “Sometimes however you vanish into a linguistic edifice you have erected” (T 703): language’s structures can crumble to reveal the absence of the I. When Armel maintains to use language directly, Larissa replies that this is only “an old illusion” (T 641). In fact, the coordination of the subject’s discourse, for Lacan, occurs in a mechanic of transfer to and from the locus of the Other. If “it is from the Other that the subject receives even the message that he emits” (Lacan 1989 305), in *Thru* it is always the Other who seems to speak. The letter *O* – varying into *A* for *Autre* – is a basic pattern throughout the text, present in Greimas’ semiotic square and even mimetically presented by means of the juggling hoops of the fictional illusion: “S represent the subject of discourse and O the Other place and o the object of desire o¹ o² oⁿ” (T 669). Humorously combining Lacan’s and Barthes’ theoretical implications, the text asks, “Who speaks? The Other Author” (T 705). From the Other, the subject receives the image of itself and its own discourse.

For Lacan, “the I as signifier [...] designates the subject [...] speaking [...] but it does not signify it” (Lacan 1989 298). Therefore, the subject *I* is a “function” of the signifier: “this subject, who thinks he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is no more than [...] an object” (Lacan 1989 315) and “It is this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes” (Lacan 1989 316). In *Thru*, discourse comes irremediably from the locus of the other, all the relationships postulated in the text are specularizable, in a dialectic which subverts the binarism subject/object. I and O, Me and You, become the same thing, “Each I leads into another I, unless I into O for Other” (T 618). Each one’s life depends on the other, the master and the slave positions become interchangeable, as Jacques the fatalist puts in plain words: “although you were pleased to call yourself and I was pleased to call you the master, I am in fact yours” (T 644), “For the deep structure of I am your slave is undoubtedly you will be mine” (T 665). Each character mirrors itself in the other by means of language and Armel perfectly explains this point,

All discourse is the return of a discourse by the Other, without whom I am not, but to whom I am more attached than to myself, I say I but I mean everyone, all of us, nor can I proceed to the identification of that I except through the medium of language. (T 642-3).

Brooke-Rose elucidates this process by saying, “I suppose it’s what Lacan calls *l’autre* [...] the whole thing about language is a mirror” (Hayman and Cohen 17). If “the whole thing about language is a mirror”, the same dialectic observed among the characters of the novel exists between them and the reader. The characters are in fact said to establish a specular relationship with the reader as the reader interprets them on the basis on his/her own subjectivity,

the hero slips out of the text, establishing a specular relationship with the reader and away from the author in an eternal mechanism between the reader’s demand and the author’s gift of the character [...] castration is at the basis of this enjoyment. (T 658-9)

What generates the reader’s enjoyment is castration: we, as readers, are generated by the dialectic of desire. This is exemplified by Greimas’ semiotic square rehandled with “I” and “O” as its binary opposites: at the crossing of its bars, there is another O and an arrow indicates “YOU ARE HERE” (T 695). We are at the very centre of that dialectic, we are mutually dependent on the text and its narrative instances; we too are a narrative instance, integral part of the game. The reader of *Thru* is in fact described as “a cannibalistic survivor [which] dips into pieces of master/mistress dying or half dead” (T 677).

The same process of mirroring oneself into the Other by means of language takes place between the author and the reader. The author partakes in the dialectic of desire as he is said to be imbued with narcissistic love,

the line of twenty-seven and a half black mannikins occurs in order to generate [...] the matter upon which you write your narcissistic love the virgin page you soil in which you sow your seed [...] the clay on which you scar the zero marks of masterhood by definition doomed to fail in that it masterhoods the eyes from the iotaboo. (T 685)

The author dirties the blank page with his/her words, planting his/her seed in it, shaping it like clay and marking it with his/her own mark, which is zero since the author is the barred subject, the lacking other. Masterhood of the Other is doomed to fail because it understands/controls/ has control over the I subjects (the characters) from the I taboo.

When Hayman and Cohen ask Brooke-Rose whether her novels “shape” her reader, whether the reader is in the text, she answers,

Absolutely. He has to be, if he is reading the text at all. He is bound to be in the text. Any text addresses someone, any message [...] it’s addressed to someone, even if you are talking to yourself

[...] it hovers between *tu* and *je* and that is the same person. An I think that the reader is that, it's a *je/tu*. (Hayman and Cohen 17)

The reader is a *je/tu* because the act of using language entails the process of mirroring oneself into it: literature becomes a mirror of oneself, as the interpretative process exemplifies. The predominant erotic perspective of *Thru* is thus inscribed into the higher context of the erotic of the narrative act itself and the same text partakes in the dialectic of desire with the author, the characters and the reader: if by means of the text they are constituted as subjects, the text comes into being only by means of them, they mirror themselves into the text and the latter sends them back their own specular image.

The castrating and mirroring process which desire and language entail thus reaches the level of the whole text: characters, author and reader are all interdependent because of the discourse they share, in a movement of endless specularization and projection of desire.

Desire and castration permeate the narrative at all its levels: the text, the fictional illusion, the characters or narrators of the moment, the reader and the author are all reciprocally involved in the same dialectic of mutual dependence, in a process where each mirrors the other *through* language. A play where subject and object are interchangeable and impossible to distinguish, where the power dichotomy between them is blurred. They all *share* the narrative, acquiring a new status, a new life, in a play where what counts is narrative itself, the active fictional play, a game to which they all contribute. In this way, the text addresses and playfully rehandles Lacan's much discussed psychoanalytic theories, reshaping them for its own purpose, i.e. the creation of its own narrativity.

Brooke-Rose's novel however, while positing castration as its founding modality, nevertheless stretches forwards in a non-masculine conception of the subject which once again points to the innovative theories of Kristeva. Published one year after *Revolution in Poetic Language*, *Thru* puts into practice the very theory Kristeva speculated on. It is to me astonishing how, if Kristeva's work was immediately recognised as one of the most important theoretical breakthroughs of the time, *Thru* was not acknowledged for the way its fictional practice links to Kristeva's thought, outstandingly embodying the very narrative solution posited in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

Brooke-Rose's text playfully inscribes itself within the dispute which originated from the Lacanian dichotomy between masculine/feminine as respectively totalizing/non-totalizing, *tout/pas-tout* aspects. Lacan's conception – accused by feminist theorists of phallocentrism/phallogocentrism – gave life to a great debate¹⁷ which tried to balance the question and explain “how men and women in their psychosexuality are equal but different” (Mitchell and Rose 8).

In *Thru*, the idea of the marked/unmarked term of masculine/feminine is rejected as man and woman are both equally subjects and objects of desire, thus subverting the binary opposition of masculine *tout*/female *pas-tout*: “The notions of subject and object do not correspond to a difference in nature but to a place in the proposition uniting for instance two lovers” (T 703).

Subject and object are shown to be interchangeable firstly by means of the endless mutual invention of the characters, each constituting and being constituted in turn by the other: “Whoever you invented invented you too” (T 631).

As already seen, Kristeva surpasses Lacan in that she conceives the Semiotic and the Symbolic as *both* necessary and constitutive of the signifying process, at the same time postulating an equality between the sexes and seeing that the transgression of the symbolic does not necessarily entail schizophrenia.

Indeed, surpassing Lacan, it is Kristeva's concept of writing and what it implies in terms of the relationship between author, characters and reader, which *Thru* seems to enact. Writing is seen by Kristeva as a “trace of a dialogue with oneself (with another), as a writer's distance from himself, as a splitting of the writer into subject of enunciation and subject of utterance” (writer/character) (Kristeva 1980a 74). The very act of narrating institutes a relation to another, implies and addresses another, so that narration can be seen as “a dialogue between the *subject* of narration (S) and the *addressee* (A)” (Kristeva 1980a 74). The addressee, the other, the reading subject, is itself a double entity, both signifier in relation to the text and signified in relation to the subject of narration, “a dyad (A₁ and A₂) whose two terms, communicating with each other, constitute a code system” (Kristeva 1980a 74). The subject of narration (S) drawn into this relationship becomes a code mediated by the character as subject of utterance. S, including himself in the system of narration, is

¹⁷ See for instance Ernest Jones, “Early Female Sexuality”, *IJPA* xvi, 1935: 263-273, and Melanie Klein, “Early Stages of the Oedipus Complex”, *IJPA* ix, 1928: 167-180.

thus transformed into “neither nothingness nor anybody, but the possibility of permutation from S to A [...] He becomes an anonymity, an absence, a blank space, thus permitting the structure to exist as such” (Kristeva 1980a 74). The author is hence situated as a *zero* out of which the character is born, and the character is both subject and addressee, representing and represented.

Such is the complex relationship which is determined between subject of enunciation, addressee and subject of utterance,

On the basis of this anonymity, this zero where the author is situated, the *he/she* of the character is born. At a later stage, it will become a *proper name* [...] subject and addressee. It is the addressee, the other, exteriority [...] who transforms the subject into an *author*. That is, who has the S pass through this zero-stage of negation, of exclusion, constituted by the author. (Kristeva 1980a 75)

To support the relationship between Kristeva’s theory and the practice of *Thru*, it is the reiteration of Kristeva’s discourse into Brooke-Rose’s text, where the above discourse is repeated and re-appropriated as a “revelation” of the correspondence of author/character/reader.

After the already described scene in which Larissa is interrupted by Armel while writing her novel, *Thru* presents a conversation between Jacques the fatalist and his master. They discuss the problem raised by the episode which has just occurred: Larissa has been presented as author of the text and has also acquired a husband and a surname. Talking about such “textual problems that tie us in knots” (T 646) but which are meant to be disentangled, the master explains,

That’s the whole point, you see, out of the zero where the author is situated, both excluded and included, the third person is generated, pure signifier of the subject’s experience. Later this third person acquires a proper name, figure of this paradox, one out of zero, name out of anonymity, visualisation of the fantasy into a signifier that can be looked at, seen. You should read Kristeva that’s what she says. Though we mustn’t forget that in the grammar of narrative the proper name coincides with the agent. In this way the construction of a character has to pass through a death, necessary to the structuring of the subject as subject of utterance, and for his insertion into the circuit of signifiers, I mean the narration. It is therefore the recipient, you Jacques, or anyone, the other, who transforms the subject into author, making him pass through this zero-stage, this negation, this exclusion which is the author. I am in fact dead, Jacques. (T 647)

Far from being a mere repetition, imitation, in *Thru* Kristeva’s words are repeated/transformed/re-appropriated, thus maintaining on the one hand their original meaning, and acquiring on the other a playful tone, inscribed as they are within the discourse between Jacques the fatalist and his Master, who declares to be dead but is indeed talking.

After such an explanation it is said “Everything is becoming clear at last. God! No! Yes! Quick, pen and paper” (T 647), and the anagrams of Armel and Larissa’s names are clearly revealed, thus exemplifying the exchange between writing subject and addressee. Larissa (who was writing a text) and Armel (a character in it) become both subject and object of enunciation, their anagrammatic names disclose the specular relationship between writing subject and characters.

At the same time, the character becomes subject of utterance only at the cost a split, of its own death, by means of which it is inserted in the narrative as signifier. It is the Other, the reader, who constitutes the subject as such. Without the reader (the other), the character (the subject) would not be such. The same happens to the author who, in order to be constituted as such, must pass through his own death, the zero stage, by means of the other. Characters are indeed “marked with zeroist authorship” (T 681). This recalls the Lacanian theory of subject, for which the subject’s constitution inaugurates its split (it brings about its death as unified subject-author). The subject enters the order of language but becomes a mere signifier and needs the other in order to be. It is therefore the other who renders the Other subject, making him pass through a negation which is a radical split. The subject needs the other in order to be and *vice versa*, in a mutual relationship of need where each of the term looks for what it lacks in the other, without finding it, but receiving back only a reflection of its own lack. In *Thru*, at the basis of this dialectic is the narcissistic stance of the author. The text in fact alludes many times to a narcissistic “implied author who is in love with himself” (T 674). In Lacan’s theory, the subject looks at the object – the Other – in search for what he lacks, but receives back only his own lack: the narcissistic narrator looks at himself in the mirror through the text, but the text is the *object petit a* which sends back the image to the narcissistic author. The author looks at the text and the text looks back at the author. The same happens between reader and author, as Brooke-Rose explains, “The reader is someone imaginary in my head [...] it is not the reader out there who is going to read the book. I think the reader is me, as I write” (Hayman and Cohen 16). If the object of desire is the Other, the subject seeks his desire in the other: the text, the author, the characters and the reader all seek for their desire in the other. The process of specularization is infinite and is brought into life through language. Language is life

for the narrative, but language brings about castration. Hence the text's dialectic of desire: desire is never attainable, always deferring, summoning up again Derrida's infinite deferral of meaning.

The movement between subject and object thus postulates the identity between writer and reader and the text as their dialogue. In other words, S, the subject of narration (author) exists in a specular relationship with both himself and A, the addressee. S is reduced to anonymity (as writer) because it is mediated by a third person, the character. The writer passes through his own death to give life to the character, the proper name, which on the one hand transforms the S into author (who passes through his own death) and from the other becomes both S_r – subject of enunciation – and S_d – subject of utterance.

To go further into our analysis, the very relationship between S_r and S_d mirrors and reconstitutes the relationship between S and A, their dialogue. As Kristeva reinstates,

The *subject of utterance* is both representative of the subject of enunciation and represented as object of the subject of enunciation. It is therefore commutable with the writer's anonymity. A *character* (a personality) is constituted by this generation of a double entity starting from zero. The subject of utterance is "dialogical," both S and A are disguised within it. (Kristeva 1980a 76)

The difference between subject and object is utterly abolished, the distinction between signifier and signified is played on and eluded in the very relationship between author and reader, reflected in and by means of the characters. The same text indeed presents Larissa's actions as "functioning like the bar between signifier and signified for ever eluded played out elsewhere yet ineluctably played out right here" (T 649).

The signifiers of a dialogical text are themselves dialogical, narration becomes a dialogical medium/space where addresser and addressee, S_r and S_d, are in turn both signifier and signified, "a permutation of two signifiers" (Kristeva 1980a 76).

In the subversive and rebellious structure of carnival, the distinction between subject and object of the action is blurred: each instance is both actor and spectator, losing the sense of individuality, passing "through the zero point of carnivalesque activity and split[ting] into a subject of the spectacle and object of the game" (Kristeva 1980a 78)

In light of the dialogism between S and A – both readers and writers of the narrative – in *Thru* the subject of utterance coincides with both the subject of

enunciation and the addressee. $S_d = S_r = A$ in an endless mirroring of one into the other and oneself, the mirroring that the very practice of language entails. In my view, Brooke-Rose goes even further in the line of Kristeva's theorisation, in that her very text becomes in its relationship with S, S_r , S_d and A, both subject and object of discourse, and it is constructed as both the object and the subject of the intertextual relationships. As Kristeva explains, it is "only through certain narrative structures that this dialogue – this hold on the sign as double, this ambivalence of writing – is exteriorized in the actual organization of poetic discourse on the level of textual, literary occurrence" (Kristeva 1980a 76). In *Thru* the dialogical matrix is exteriorized, *mimed to the extreme*, clearly addressed and overdetermined on the one hand, blurred on the other and resolved in a reaffirmation of pure fictionality. In this sense, the work can be read as "fictional criticism" or "critical fiction", in that it both mimes and reflects the debate over language and literature of the time.

Thru puts into practice the logic of dialogism and subverts binarism, thus becoming a revolutionary text. A text which produces dizziness and resistance in the reader, but which ultimately seems to aim at a reequilibration of polarities. The novel thus embodies Kristeva's idea that "More than binarism, dialogism may well become the basis of our time's intellectual structure" (Kristeva 1980a 85-6). The idea of the reequilibration of polarities which *Thru* already puts forward would be stressed, years later, by Brooke-Rose in her essay "The Dissolution of Character in the Novel". She would explain that, although "equilibrium is supposed", the metaphysics of presence which subtends our culture has always privileged one term over its opposite (presence/absence, speech/writing, male/female etc.). The inversion of the polarities is a practice which "produces dizziness and fear (and resistance)", but whose ultimate effect can be an enriching and creative reequilibration of binaries (Brooke-Rose 1986 195).

The characters of *Thru* (and their/our narrative) gain new life by means of their peculiar use of language which renews itself at each and every word and which – as already explained – incessantly creates and destroys meaning, generating humour and poetry. They achieve a new level of expression, and therefore existence, through their use of language. If Grant reads the continuous process of construction and destruction which *Thru* presents as a fight of each character/narrator against each

other, as an “ontological struggle” (Grant 12) over authority, my aim is to show that this “radical usurpation of another’s existential self” (Grant 14) is for the text a means to positively attain a new dialectic author-reader-characters. If struggle must be, I would rather see it as a narrato(onto)logical struggle against the sources of anxiety which threaten to kill narration. It is correct to say that *Thru* is a text that “progressively destroys itself as it is read” (Hayman and Cohen 3). However, while destroying itself, it paradoxically and playfully asserts and constructs itself as text, one that gives author, fictional characters and readers, a new degree of freedom and life by means of a dialectic of death and life involved with each other which generates new life,

A good point, and the subject of our present analysis [...] The author has lost authority many times in the history of narrative, when one type has consumed itself, the element of manipulation becoming too visible thus destroying the fictive illusion, and no-one has yet come along to renew it, usually, as here, reconstructing it by perpetual destruction, generating a text which in effect is a dialogue with all preceding texts, a death and a birth dialectically involved with one another, but this is another problem. (T 621)

After having clearly explained its textual strategy, the text “cheats” again and declares “this is another problem”. In fact, this is not “another problem”, but the tactic through which the novel builds up its narrative and attains new life. If “every discourse [...] implies the absence of things as desire implies the absence of its object” (T 681), if words refer to the absence of things and desire refers to the absence of its object which is unrecoverable, yet even so *and because of this*, words are the only way we have to narrate and therefore to live, thus generating “a discourse in which it is death that sustains existence” (Lacan 1989 300). Far from stopping at “destruction”, Brooke-Rose creates, generates a new text, a text which is a “death and birth involved in a dialectic to the death with one another” (T 699).

“Our object revolution is very much present, and desired” says one of the students, to whom another one replies, “It can’t be both that’s a polarity” (T 725). Indeed *it is* both, as *Thru* subverts polarities and renders its revolution both present and desired. Revolution becomes the textual defence mechanism against the narrative anxiety derived from the dead alley literature seemed to have entered into, “E se non è vero it is well founded like all defence mechanisms” (T 614).

Narrative anxiety is subverted into a positive play in which the writer *willingly* exposes the foundations of her edifice not in order for it to crumble as a means in

itself, but as a means to another end, i.e. the *reaffirmation* of the fictional play. Narrative, fiction, is given new life by stressing its own fictionality and *ludique* ethics. The pessimism brought about by the debate over author/reader and the ontological status of language is offered an exit through the text itself and playfulness, linguistic humour, creative narrative and language. Language and fiction come back to life: the *exit from* the debate *into* the text has to pass necessarily *through* the text. It is as if the text said, dialoguing with itself about the importance of the fictionality of narration and its threat of death,

- Hey, amidst all this chaos, what is the most important thing?
- Narration, as it is life itself.
- So, let's save narration! Let's take it out of this mayhem of concepts and sterile dispute.
- Yes, but how?
- Through narration.

And so did narration exit the death of narration, *through itself*.

Thru is a text that necessarily makes its reader thoroughly reconsider the notions of language and fictionality. It is “a grammar of narrative” (Reyes 55), a revolutionary work which makes the reader experience heterogeneous contradiction in order to bring about renewal in the subject and in the creative fictional practice. Its creative revolution aims at a re-engagement with the seemingly lost passion for realist (not *Realist*) fiction and with the gift of an imaginative but also prepared critical analysis.

Thru is a “very subtly planned chaos” (T 592). It is a text which “displays the full Postmodernist repertoire of destabilizing strategies, including self-contradiction” (McHale 1995 200). It is a text where “Instability of status and reversibility of levels infects [...] every narratological category we normally rely on for novelistic coherence and legibility” (McHale 1995 200). *Thru*, however, engenders destabilization and deconstruction only in order to achieve, on an inverse ladder, the *possibility of renewal and regeneration of both writing and reading practices*. The destabilizing chaos of Brooke-Rose's novel ultimately reaffirms the importance of literature and language as a mirror of life.

Chapter 7

After *Thru*: Brooke-Rose's novels from *Amalgamemnon* onwards

This section will examine Brooke-Rose's fictional output after *Thru* by way of providing a more comprehensive account of her career but also, most specifically, of better supporting my choice of concentrating my dissertation specifically on the author's first tetralogy, and particularly on *Between* and *Thru*. In fact, although literary theories find echo in all of Brooke-Rose's novels, their presence in Brooke-Rose's novels from *Amalgamemnon* onwards is not so pervasive as in *Between* and *Thru*. Moreover, *Between* anticipates critical theories which were still to gain importance on the theoretical scene of the time, while *Thru* foreruns a certain criticism which was to be moved to the theories it addresses only decades later. For these reasons, it is only *Between* and *Thru* which, in my view, can be regarded as an example of "critical fiction" or "fictional criticism".

After the appearance of *Thru*, Brooke-Rose did not publish fiction for nine years. In 1984, *Amalgamemnon* inaugurated her second tetralogy, also defined as the "Intercom Quartet" (Birch 113). The novel distinguishes itself from the works collected in the *Omnibus* edition for the clear attempt, on Brooke-Rose's part, towards more readability, probably because of the negative treatment *Thru* had received for its difficulty. In fact, the author abandons here the numerous and forever shifting narrators of *Thru*, and goes back to a single consciousness through which everything is filtered. Moreover, her main character posits herself as the subject of the enunciation through the use of the subject pronoun *I*, and acquires both a name and a surname. Although the difficulty of *Thru* is in this way abandoned, *Amalgamemnon* also presents, as we will see, a strong play with the dubious ontology of its characters and increasingly blurs the borders between narrative levels.

The point of view adopted in the novel is still the internal one of the first four experimental works: the author puts herself inside the consciousness of the character and represents her perceptions objectively. The tense used is no longer the present tense: the author explores a different linguistic constraint and employs almost uniquely non-constative, non-realised tenses, i.e. the future, the conditional, the

imperative and the subjunctive, with only a few exceptions which see the present employed in direct speech.

The central character of the novel is Mira Enketei, a professor of classics who is probably going to be made redundant in a time when the humanities have become obsolete. The external events she perceives are inextricably mixed with her thoughts, memories, and imagination. Her consciousness mingles external and internal inputs, giving life to a series of stories within stories, which Mira seems to create in particular during the nights when, unable to sleep, she leaves her bed to listen to her radio and read passages from Herodotus. The radio programmes and Herodotus' *Histories* are indeed the starting point for her imaginative flights. They "activate", or better "trigger" her imagination, which then assembles extracts from radio talk-shows, news, advertisements, and quiz-games together with the classical passages she reads, with bits of her past life, various thoughts and memories, and with other fragments of her classical knowledge. Amalgamating all this, Mira continuously gives life to various stories and tales. All the dialogues, events, situations and people presented (friends, students, lovers, relatives) appear in fact to be entirely created out of her mind, and Mira "enters" into her characters' consciousnesses just as Brooke-Rose does with her.

The characters Mira creates are given names of Latin and Greek origin (mostly names of stars) in accordance to the salient traits of their personality. For instance, Cygnus the constellation, becomes in Mira's imagination a teacher of semiotics because of the Latin homophony of Cygnus and Signum, as well as the French one of Cygne and Signe. The same teacher is later called Professor Swann (Cf. A 78, 108). Similarly, Orion becomes a political dissident for his analogy with the mythical hunter (Cf. A 54-55), whilst Thuban, the name of a star in the constellation of the Dragon, which is connoted by aggressiveness, becomes the name of one of Mira's students who keeps on harassing and criticising her (Cf. A 6-7). The same student will later become the dragon of a fairy-tale Mira invents (Cf. A 92). In the same way, Andromeda, who was punished by Poseidon and saved by Perseus, becomes a woman who is constantly dependent on men, variously called "Anne de Rommeda", "Anna Crusis" (i.e. anacrusis), "Anna Coluthon" (i.e. anacoluthon), and "Anna Biosis" (i.e. anabiosis) (A 32, 34, 43, 59).

As in *Thru*, in *Amalgamemnon* we have a continual transgression of narrative levels and the ontological status of characters is increasingly blurred. The reader is almost unable to distinguish the “real” fragments of Mira’s life from her imaginative projections, to distinguish among different fictional worlds. Metalepses are conducted both by Mira herself and by the characters she creates, who seem to be able to pass freely from one narrative level to another, transgressing the fictional world of her mind and entering the “real” world she exists in. For instance, they argue with her even if she does not want to be disturbed, and write menacing and annoying letters to her. The borders between different narrative levels are abolished and the novel’s fictionality is constantly emphasised: the text is shown to be only a construction of words on the page. The continuous shift of narrative levels becomes, as in *Thru*, a way to endow the text with an open structure, and therefore a way to elude fixed meaning. *Amalgamemnon* is thus another plural text, one which rejects the imposition of univocal meaning. Moreover, the multi-meaningful names assumed by the characters (which concurrently indicate mythological figures, stars, and fictional characters) crucially add to their ontological instability, to their participation of different narrative levels or levels of “reality”.

In the confusion of narrative levels, even Mira gradually assumes different identities: she becomes Sandra/Cassandra, Emma, the Abyssinian Maid, the streetsweeper, and she even identifies with Orion. She also invents for herself and for “her characters” three different family trees, which further accentuate the instability of the ontological status of all the characters, including herself. The genealogical trees can be also read as a mimicry of the realist technique of furnishing extensive biographical details in order to support the veridicity of the world depicted. The trees become a parody of what Brooke-Rose defines the “semiological compensation” of realist fiction (Brooke-Rose 1981 87). Moreover, each time Mira draws a tree, she invents stories in order to account for the genealogy she has just imagined, contrarily to what would normally happen in realist fiction, where a genealogical tree would be presented in order to support the authenticity of the stories narrated.

In light of the ontological instability of the text, the protagonist’s name acquires important implications. Mira is the name of a star in the constellation of Cetus, the whale, whilst her surname, Enketi, is made up of two different Greek

terms, ἐν – inside, and κήτος – whale. Her name obviously recalls the image of Jonah inside the whale (a theme we have already seen in *Out* and *Between*), a reading which is made explicit by the character later referring to herself as “inside the Whale, In Cetus, Mira Enketei” (A 32). The star Mira in astronomy possesses a quality of variability. This quality, together with the fact that the character shifts identity many times throughout the novel, introduces the reader to a changeable character, one which acquires diverse identities in the course of the novel.

Mira’s continuous shifts of identity are inextricably related to her being a woman. In fact, as a woman, she is submitted to a coercive imposition of meaning by the society she exists in, and shifting identities becomes a way for her to elude categorization, to avoid becoming fixed, to oppose the patriarchal system of signification. If the interpreter in *Between* repeats and transforms all the different discourses of society in order to elude fixed meaning and recuperate her own identity in between those discourses, Mira does something very similar. She shifts identities continuously in order to avoid being categorized once and for all by the society she inhabits. Moreover, she continuously reassembles bits of memories, radio programmes etc., and invents stories upon stories out of their fusion. She thus assumes for herself the role of author, of creator of stories through language, thus exemplifying the way reality is constructed by language. This idea is reinforced by the fact that she creates both her own identities and those of the other characters in the novel. Like the stories, so the identities she invents are entirely a construction of language. In this way, she subverts the concept of a fixed meaning conveyed by language that has dominated our society for centuries and, related to this, the concept of a fixed identity. Identity is a fiction itself, a linguistic construct.

By means of the continuous stories she invents, Mira also exposes the predominantly masculine mechanism of imposition of meaning, one perpetuated through and by means of language. Exposing the masculine use of language becomes a way of exposing the masculine logic of society. For instance, her imaginary lovers Willy and Wally are firmly convinced that they can save Mira from her “emotional desert”, but in reality they are shown as they try to turn her “into a captive” (A 10), or to “atomize” her “own lifelong passions” (A 130). They easily dismiss her inquiries and discourses, including her attempt to break up with them, as “woman-

nonsense” (A 61). Far from loving her, men try to *own* her, patronise her, as already we have seen in the case of *Between*’s interpreter. Both Willy and Wally wait impatiently for Mira to be made redundant, as they believe that after losing her job she will finally accept their marriage proposal, that she “will accept, and face, being only a woman” (A 15, 136). Similarly, the consideration of women as exchange value among men which we have observed in *Between*, comes back here as the Abyssinian Maid (Mira) is given by her parents upon payment of three camels (Cf. A 28), or else as the Princess Fatima-my-Folly (again Mira) becomes, together with a kingdom and a treasure, the reward for whom will rescue her from the dragon (Cf. A 88).

The strategy through which Mira exposes and subverts the patriarchal prejudices against women is therefore that already observed in *Between*. Mimicry, i.e. the apparently subservient repetition of man’s discourse by woman, makes the logic of that discourse come to light. Mira repeats the stereotyped discourses about women in order to expose their underlying logic. For instance she “humbly” states, “Even in the supernew present technorevolution I could at best be the female slave who’ll type the data into a memory for analysis but never, never the softquery expert who’ll compose the analytic programme. I wouldn’t understand” (A 60), thus exposing the cliché of woman’s lack of creativity. The prefix “mim” which is repeated throughout the novel comes to stand precisely for the practice of mimicry: Mira, for instance, agrees with man, but her agreement is “mimagreement” (A 14). Similarly, when she makes love with her lover, she expressly says that “There will occur mimecstasy even if millions of human cells remain unconvinced” (A 15), while she will pretend to be “mimecstatic” at the man’s ability to change a light-switch (A 14,15, 127).

Apart from mimicry, Mira exposes the masculine mechanism of imposition of meaning by juxtaposing men’s discourses. Juxtaposition becomes, as in *Thru*, the basic tool of her deconstructive enterprise, one which makes the phallogocentrism of our culture come to light. She repeatedly draws from Herodotus’ *Histories*, and by amalgamating his discourse with the stories she invents, her thoughts, memories, the language of the media, and the discourses of Willy and Wally, she shows how the classical tradition inaugurated the prejudices about women which are still very much

alive, prejudices and clichés which are so much rooted in our culture that we nowadays take them as the norm (Cf. A 8, 12, 23, 37, 40, 69, 135). By inserting passages (in translation) from Herodotus' *Histories* into her stories, Mira employs one of the fundamental texts of Western culture in order to expose its logic, in order to demonstrate how its discourse lies at the basis of the unfair treatment of women in our society. Herodotus, the father of history, thus becomes the "father of fibstory" (A 22, 113), the history of denigration of women, the history of lies which keeps alive the prejudices against women. The assimilation of woman to animals and objects that Herodotus suggested is repeated and exposed by Mira: women are not equal to men, but to "eunuchs, pack-animals and dogs" (A 29), or else they are compared to the "psychically under-privileged [...] the handicapped, the children" (A 51-52). Women are described as reward to ancient commanding generals, together with "horses, camels, gold pieces and other objects" (A 83). In Herodotus, the description of women's as exchange objects is omnipresent (Cf. for instance Herodotus 200-201). Again, Mira defines women as "twittering birds" (A 14), recalling Herodotus' definition of women's language as the "twittering of birds" (Herodotus 152). Moreover, Mira crucially identifies with Cassandra,

As if for instance I were someone else, Cassandra perhaps, walking dishevelled the battlements of Troy, uttering prophecies from time to time unheeded and unheeded, before being allotted as a slave to victorious Agamemnon. (Brooke-Rose 1984 7)

This identification bears important implications in the novel. Cassandra is in fact the prophetess doomed not to be believed, imprisoned by Agamemnon and reduced to silence. Cassandra, known to speak in the future tense (the one used in the novel), was not believed and died as a prisoner in complete isolation. She is an example of women's rebellion as she dared to speak, even if she was not heard by society. Through the figure Cassandra, Brooke-Rose seems to show how even centuries ago woman was not deemed capable of "truthful" discourse and was soon reduced to a male custody.

Amalgamemnon is clearly a deconstructionist novel, one which deconstructs the notion of stable significance and fixed identity, and demonstrates how everything is constructed by language, consequently demonstrating how the concept of woman is in itself a linguistic construct. As already done in *Between* and *Thru*, Brooke-Rose deconstructs the idea of a feminine identity by showing how the concept arises from

the dominant use of language, a use which acts in accordance with the masculine ideology of fixed meaning and appropriation of power. Mira opposes men's attempt to reduce her to fixed meaning by continuously shifting identity, inventing and reinventing herself in her stories, whilst at the same time exposing the masculine power logic by means of mimicry and juxtaposition.

The novel's dubious ontology and the tenses employed are strictly related to the textual deconstructive strategy. The non-realised tenses of *Amalgamemnon*, in fact, continuously throw doubt on the events narrated and strongly concur to give the idea of the fictionality of the world the text describes. Thanks to the use of non-realised tenses, facts are never confirmed, as for instance Mira's redundancy. With an opening line which clearly recalls that of Beckett's *Malone Dies* (Cf. Beckett 1979 165), Mira declares, "I shall soon be quite redundant at last despite of all" (A 5). This, however, is only an hypothesis of a future possibility, never confirmed by a present or a past tense. In effect, towards the end of the novel, Mira repeats, still in the future, "Soon there will come the expected letter in bureotechnish that will make me definitely redundant" (A 124).

The future tense seems to be also employed to expose the fictionality of the discourses of the experts who continually presume to be able to predict facts and events scientifically. For instance, we are told that "Soon the ecopolitical system will crumble, and sado-experts will fly in from all over the world and poke into its smoking entrails and utter smooching agnostications" (A 15), or else that the "ecozoologists" (A 18) or "the ecopoliticonomists will fly in from everywhere and poke the entrails of the grunterranean fire and mutter smooching pragnostications and stake out their statistics" (A 21). Experts such as economists, politicians and scientists are in this way compared to clairvoyants or fortune-tellers, as they make would-be truthful predictions on the basis of animals' entrails. The distinction between rational, scientific (real) and illogical (fictitious) knowledge is blurred: scientific reality cannot be distinguished from the irrational and fictitious discourses from which it claims to be different. The future and conditional tenses transmute the reality of *all* the facts narrated into fiction: contemporary society is foregrounded as fictional, the nature of the discourses of the media is exposed as novelistic. The stories Mira tells shows the equality between the supposedly real and truthful

discourse of science and its experts and that of literature: creative story-telling indeed replaces the discourses of the media and shows how there is no difference between them. The stories Mira tells follow traditional novelistic tropes: different novelistic genres such as the spy novel, the popular romance, and the thriller are fused together and parodied, together with the discourses of the media and the would-be truthful discourses of experts. In this way, the conventionality of both discursive genres – novelistic and scientific – is foregrounded: the assumption of verisimilitude of the discourses of authority of contemporary society is undermined.

The media, it is said in the text, function as an “afterthought rearranging history past and present in the light of national self-esteem for political ends and means” (A 21). This is clearly an attack on the discourses of the media which ignore the fictionality of their status as they ignore the basis of their constitution, which is a linguistic convention. In opposition to this, Mira hypothesises an approach to knowledge and reality, past and present, by which “The highest marks will be given, not to the most correct which will be unverifiable but to the most ingenious” (A 21), an approach which would therefore subvert the dichotomy fictional/real.

With a parallel move, *Amalgamemnon* deconstructs another dichotomy, i.e. that of classical/modern knowledge. The novel foregrounds the problematic relationship between contemporary science/technology and the humanities. It shows how we live in a world where classical knowledge has become more and more obsolete, as opposed to the media technology and modern science, which have progressively gained importance. In an increasingly technocratic world, the humanist academic is in danger of losing his/her role in society. Mira, with her classical knowledge is indeed going to be made redundant. *Amalgamemnon* thus inaugurates the main theme of the Intercom Quartet, i.e. the threat technology could represent for the novelistic genre. As Mira foresees, the possibility which lies in wait is that “techne [...] will soon be silenced by the high technology” (A 5). *Amalgamemnon* expresses the anxiety for the fate of the novelistic genre in a world of “secondary orality”, i.e. the return to oral culture engendered by the media and discussed by Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy*. As Ong explains, “The electronic transformation of verbal expression has [...] brought consciousness to a new age of second orality”, an age where “composition on computer terminals is replacing older

forms of typographic composition” (Ong 1982 135, 136)¹⁸. In order to oppose this state of things and deconstruct the dichotomy classical/modern culture, the novel clearly shows that the past still affects the present and that the former cannot be abstracted from when trying to understand and interpret the current state of society.

Brooke-Rose accomplishes this firstly by playing on the etymology of various terms and by employing allusions to and quotations from classical texts, thus directing the attention of her readers on the history and evolution of language, and encouraging them to recognise the legacy of past culture. We have already said how the various characters Mira invents are given names of Greek or Latin origins, and how their names determine their roles in the stories. Their Greek and Latin names are still employed by modern astronomy to designate stars and constellations. The use of such astronomical terms in *Amalgamemnon* seems thus to show the influence the past still retains on the present, as we continue to use Latin and Greek terms to designate the subject of modern studies. Although we tend to forget the original meaning of those terms, the heritage of classical culture is still present in our society and understanding it is essential to better grasp many of its characteristics: nowadays astronomy is still inextricably related to classical mythology and history. Moreover, by drawing together and juxtaposing the domains of modern astronomy and classical culture (Herodotus in particular), the text blurs the distinction between them, therefore subverting the dichotomy between past and present systems of knowledge. The past still lies at the basis of our world, and we cannot abstract from it when trying to understand our society.

The novel thus accomplishes a double task. On the one hand, it presents the increasing technologization of our culture and shows the risk inherent in this process. It demonstrates how the subject relying on a classical culture gets completely destabilised by this state of things, and how the risk is that of losing sight of the strict relationship between present and past culture, of forgetting that at the basis of the contemporary scientific discourse lies the discourse of classical culture. On the other hand, it shows how classical culture is also responsible for the contemporary gender politics. Understanding the origins of our discourses – that of the modern science and

¹⁸ For a fuller discussion on this topic see in particular Ong 1982 135-38 and 134-179.

that of the male dominated society – is of crucial importance to expose both the fictionality of the power discourses and recognise their false tropes.

The theme of technological revolution which *Amalgamemnon* already presents is addressed more directly and developed in Brooke-Rose's following novel. *Xorandor* (1986) focuses on the discovery of a mysterious talking stone made by Jip and Zab, two twins learned in the new cybernetic technology and highly used to operating computers. In this novel, Brooke-Rose's attempt towards more readability (after the experimental climax of *Thru*) is again evident in that the two kids can be easily identified as both central characters and narrators of their story. Although it is always the author who puts herself inside their consciousnesses, the characters overtly place themselves as the narrators of the events and describe, in a more realistic fashion, their own experience. They even provide a more realistic context for their story by furnishing precise details on their own physical appearance and on their family, a kind of description which we find for the first time in Brooke-Rose's experimental novels.

The 12-year-old twins discover the stone – Xorandor – at an old cairn in Cornwall and realise they can communicate with the stone through their pocket computer. Although they initially believe that the stone is the ghost of Merlin, and try to teach it to speak their cybernetic slang, they soon conjecture that the stone must be responsible for the mysterious disappearance of radioactive materials from the local nuclear-waste compartment. They interrogate Xorandor, which explains that he feeds on radioactivity, that he has been stealing the nuclear waste, and that he has come from Mars in search of provisions. Before long, the adults discover the presence of the stone, and whilst in a first moment his "eating habits" appear to be a perfect solution to the problem of nuclear waste, Xorandor then reveals that he has mistakenly eaten a perilous isotope which has generated a "syntax error" in Xor 7, one of his offspring. At this point, the mutant stone threatens to blow a nuclear reactor up if humans do not permanently feed his entire race, but thanks to Jip and Zab he is persuaded to give up his terroristic plan.

Once the world crisis has been avoided, the kids are sent to Germany, in order not to stay involved with the discovery, and are able to follow the developments of the events only through the media. When, a year-and-a-half later, they are eventually

allowed to come back, they learn that the stone and his offspring are under strict observation in different parts of the world, and that Xorandor has programmed his “children” to escape and destroy nuclear missiles. The defence strategies of the nuclear-armed countries are obviously in danger, and a communal decision to send all the stones back to Mars is taken. At this time, Xorandor, who had refused to communicate with the adults, tells the children that in reality he does not come from Mars: his race has been living on Earth for millions of years and he has decided to break the silence only to inform humankind of his dangerous syntax error, or perhaps he has produced the syntax error on purpose, in order to warn humans of the danger implicit in their nuclear developments.

Although the kids employ their own peculiar cybernetic slang, the language of *Xorandor* does not present the extended use of puns of novels such as *Between* or *Thru*. The language used by the kids is at times difficult to read for its neologising cybernetic terms, yet it is also very clear-cut, almost telegraphic, as it replicates the language used by the new computer technology. Jip and Zab try to furnish a most precise account of what happens, as if they were compiling a scientific report. In order to show the way they communicated with the stone, they insert in the narrative printouts of their conversations with the stone.

When the kids realise that the stone is itself a computer, they clearly see that it operates with a different logic from the machines they know and use. In fact, Xorandor is able to use both the rigorous logic of our computer language and another, odd and contradictory logic: “His logic could be both absolutely rigorous and absolutely contradictory at crucial points, some arguments could be both XOR and AND, or XOR and Or” (X 18). The terms AND, OR, and XOR are employed in cybernetics to indicate the fundamental operations on which computer logic is based. As Birch explains, “The terms, derived from the concepts of Boolean algebra, correspond to specific types of logical operators, or gates, in an integrated circuit. In an OR gate (also known as inclusive or) an initial input of two binary terms will yield one if either or both of the terms is one. In an XOR gate (exclusive or) the output will be one if either but not both of the initial terms is one. An AND gate will yield one if and only if both initial terms are one. In all other cases the output is, of course, zero” (Birch 124). The stone can use “AND OR for the basic and the full

ASCII code, meaning non-exclusive OR, and OR for exclusive OR or XOR, for sounds as pronounced”, (X 18), so that he is able to conceive both inclusive and exclusive arguments simultaneously. Xorandor’s logic transgresses that of binary systems because he can account for mutually exclusive operations. For instance, when the two kids ask him the reason for his contact, he tells them “for security and insecurity xor insecurity andor communication” (X 81). Because of this peculiar logic(s), the kids name the stone “Xorandor”.

The paradoxical logic which Xorandor operates with is similar to that developed by Kristeva to explain the functioning of poetic language. It is a *logic other* which deconstructs binarism, the logic of the excluded middle on which our society (and computer technology) is based. Xorandor operates with both a binary, exclusive logic, and with a non-exclusive one. The stone-computer can therefore be both logical and illogical. Even before discovering its logical *modus operandi*, the kids can see that “his sense of identity is quite different from ours” (X 17). Xorandor thus unites in itself the contraries of logical/illogical and shows how another way of thinking, a different approach to meaning is not impossible. In fact, towards the end of the novel, Zab will define Xorandor’s logic as “trinary” (X 156) and will explain how the stone has “reversed all our, traditional, oppositions, and questioned, all our, certainties, through a flipflop kind of, superlogic” (X 157).

Because of his logic, Xorandor adopts communicative strategy which the kids call “Play-acting” (X 190). The stone furnishes different versions of his story depending on his interlocutors, modifying the events he recounts in accordance with the perceptions and beliefs that different people have of him. His approach to “reality” appears to be similar to the art of story-telling: “As mothers with children, and sometimes women with their men. Xorandor doesn’t laugh at people, he goes along with them at their level, telling them what he knows they want to hear. After all, we all play language-games” (X 190). For example, although he can speak English, he pretends to learn it from the kids. Similarly, when the postmistress conjectures that he comes from Mars, he does not refute the hypothesis, but lets her believe what she wishes to believe. Later on, when scientists analyse him in order to prove his Martian origin, he even alters his chemical composition to confirm their belief, only to eventually reveal to the children that he is a terrestrial creature.

Ultimately, Jip and Zab clearly realise that Xorandor has told different versions of his story to different people, and that discovering the truth about him and his origin remains impossible. The dichotomy real/fictional is thus completely blurred. Contradictions and undecidability lies at the basis of the novel, as exemplified by non-mutually exclusive logic of Xorandor. The mystery of the stone's origin will never be solved, and the scientists' speculations about its Martian origin, far from being the exclusive "reality", will appear only as a possible interpretation of the events. In this way, the novel undermines the idea of science as able to discover truth and meaning in things and shows (once again in Brooke-Rose's writing) that identity is only a linguistic construct, and that the reality we believe to be firm and stable only depends on our interpretation.

As they proceed with their narration, Jip and Zab also discuss, self-reflexively, the art of narrating. Because of their young age and their inexperience as narrators, and because the contradictions the events present, they sometimes hesitate in telling their story and often furnish a slightly different version of what they have just recounted. Throughout the novel, the twins blame the language they use (logical, binaristic) for not being able to comprehend Xorandor's *modus operandi*. In reality, the reason for their language's inadequacy lies in the use they make of it. In fact, from the start, they approach language in an extremely logical way and try to employ it as scientifically as possible. What they seem to forget when they lament the impossibility of language to understand a "superlogic", is that language also possesses a superlogic, i.e. it can be illogical, metaphorical, non-literal and parodic. It is the way the twins consider and employ language which does not permit them to understand a different logic. They do not know that language can be effectively employed at the service of a superlogic, one which explodes the binary system of signification based on the 0-1 sequence. What the novel seems to imply is that the way we use language is fundamental to the way we approach and interpret life, and it is up to us to exploit the creative and superlogical possibilities of language, and therefore to achieve a different understanding of the world.

The twins' attitude towards the linguistic means exemplifies the Western metaphysical approach to signification which, unable to surpass binarism, does not admit any other logic outside of its own. Jip and Zab are experts in the language of

computer programming, a language which they believe to be absolutely logical and exclusive. They narrate their story following this logic, but eventually discover that the logic of narrative is different, that it is less rigorous than the language they try to use: “it seems harder to tell a story, even our own, than to make up the most complex program. Or at least to choose how to tell it” (X 8). They have in fact problems with “sequence-control” (X 23, 28), and complain that “even with hindsight we can’t decide what’s really relevant and in what order” (X 35). The twins’ initial aim to write an absolutely objective and scientific report on the Xorandor phenomenon is destined to be frustrated. Their account will turn out to be full of uncertainties and dubious interpretations. The more they strive to write it objectively, the more they face the impossibility of doing so, as every attempt to put into words the events will inevitably imply interpretation and therefore falsification. Memory also adds to their difficulty: once in Germany, they will write by recollecting their experiences, but will blame memory as unreliable (Cf. X 126) and recognise that recollecting equals interpreting and therefore falsifying (Cf. X 93, 105). In fact, although the positing of the two kids as characters-narrators is initially apparently fairly straightforward, the several doubts and ambiguities introduced in the story eventually show that the seemingly reliable narrators turn out to be unreliable. The difficulty Jip and Zab have in telling their story also derives from the changes in the educative system brought about by their highly-technological society. Humanities, as in *Amalgamemnon*, have become obsolete. Universities only offer the choice between physics and high-tech: no possibility of studying philosophy or literature is given, for these fields of knowledge are now considered as leisure pursuits.

Not only will the children realise that narrative discourse can account for contradictions and undecidability, whereas the language they try to use, based on the rigorous logic of computer technology cannot do so, but also and most importantly they will discover that the high-tech logic has at its basis the same concept of undecidability of narrative discourse. The novel indeed deconstructs the dichotomy between the two areas of knowledge (scientific and humanistic), as it shows that at the basis of the scientific development there lies the discursive mode of narrative. In fact, the concept of undecidability is shown not only to work in narrative to put together apparently contradictory versions of the same events (as the kids do), but it

is also shown to be at the basis of cybernetics. In fact, when Jip tells Zab a sentence he has read on a wall's graffito at school, "If the human brain was simple enough for us to understand we'd be so simple we couldn't", Zab replies that this is "a popular version of the Gödel theorem". He then tries to recall the theorem and explains,

Gödel's theorem had been that in any powerful logical system things can be formulated that can't be proved or disproved inside the same system, and that someone called Turing had then applied it to machine intelligence and shown that no machine could, erm, I floundered, completely understand itself, I mean, tackle all its own problems. (X 88)

Gödel's theorem, reported by Ian Stewart in his work *The Problems of Mathematics*, posits that "(1) If formal set theory is consistent then there exist theorems that can neither be proved nor disproved. (2) There is no procedure which will prove set theory consistent" (qtd. in Stewart 218). What the theorem implies is that no theory or theoretical system can be said to be infallible: "Gödel showed that there are true statements in arithmetic that can never be proved, and that if anyone finds a proof that arithmetic is consistent, then it isn't" (Stewart 214). As Stewart further explains, in 1936, Turing applied this principle to a conceptual prototype of the modern computer, demonstrating that there exist undecidable problems which cannot be solved by any algorithm. He therefore formulated the most basic "undecidability theorem", since "certain very natural questions *have no answer whatsoever*" (Stewart 214)¹⁹. What follows from this, i.e. what Brooke-Rose's novel exposes, is that at the basis of the science of cybernetics and its language lies the concept of indeterminacy, of undecidability, and that contemporary scientists often overlook this fundamental tenet and believe that their science expresses absolute and stable truths. The twins father, a physician, explains in fact how computer logic "can't cope with a word used in a figurative sense, or with humour, which depends on word-play, which is like assigning two values to a character" (X 87). But this is not true of Xorandor, which on the contrary, uses puns. For instance he puns on Shakespeare and says "SOFTWARELY WE ARE OBSERVED" (X 179). One of the kids, puzzled at this pun, asks, "How can a computer give a playful answer, or even an ambiguous answer?", whilst the other promptly replies, "We called him Xorandor, dodn't we?" (X 182). What the kids realise is that not only Xorandor's logic entails undecidability, but above all that this undecidability lies at the basis of the computer

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion on the limits of computability see Stewart 213-221.

language they use: “even computer logic can contain ambiguities [...] you know very well that in a context-free grammar no general procedure exists for determining whether the grammar can be ambiguous in any one of every single case [...] The question is then said to be undecidable” (X 182). The apparently illogical *modus operandi* of *Xorandor* is thus revealed to be at the basis of the computer science. The kids realise that indeterminacy lies at the basis of apparently logical operations: a characteristic specific to narrative is shown to be central to the most logical of sciences.

In this way, Jip and Zab exemplify the approach which should be taken by scientists in relation to their discipline: a diachronic approach which accounts for the origin of their discourse, and therefore recognise how the logic they employ is not absolute but depends on interpretation. The kids indeed criticise the scientists who analyse *Xorandor* only in terms of his synchronic functioning and do not try to discover his genealogy. They see that “modern scientists are rarely concerned with the genealogy of things, only with their present structure and functioning” (X 191). *Xorandor* thus seems to warn scientists of the danger implicit in a monolithic and synchronic approach to their discipline, stimulating them to recognise the genealogy, the story of their science.

The third novel of Brooke-Rose’s second tetralogy, *Verbivore* (1990), is the sequel to *Xorandor*. The novel describes how *Xorandor*’s offspring manage to stop the earth’s wave communication system. As in *Thru*, in this novel, the narratorial points of view shift repeatedly. However, as with *Amalgamemnon* and *Xorandor*, Brooke-Rose tries to be more “readable” and in spite of the continual shift of narrators, the reader is able to distinguish each time whose point of view narration is being filtered through. Even the doubts occasionally introduced in relation to the viewpoint adopted are instantly solved by the text. Moreover, *Verbivore* is even linguistically much more straightforward than *Xorandor*: the somewhat difficult cybernetic slang adopted by Jip and Zab in the previous novel is here highly reduced, and so are the linguistic puns. As Birch recognises, *Verbivore* “is the most accessible of Brooke-Rose’s [experimental] novels” (Birch 128).

Verbivore takes place twenty-three years later after the events presented in *Xorandor*. The kids are now grown-ups: Jip has become a nuclear physicist at

NASA, whilst Zab is a member of the European Parliament in Aachen. The event known as Verbivore is a strange phenomenon which flattens the electromagnetic waves' modulation, thus interrupting any kind of communication based on waves transmission. The phenomenon is more and more recurrent, until it becomes permanent: all radio and video communications, all computer networks, satellites, as well as the navigational systems of planes and other vehicles are interrupted. The economy itself stops growing, and society must necessarily turn to the written medium for communication. At this point, Jip and Zab wonder whether Xorandor's offspring might not be responsible for the phenomenon, and Zab decides therefore to contact one of the stones. She learns from it that the mineral race had to sabotage the airwave-transmission in order to stop the information overload of society with which they can no longer cope. Persuaded by Zab, the stones accept to reinstate communication, but on one condition: people will reduce the amount of information emitted. Things seem to work finely for a period, for people actually watch the amount of their data emissions. However, society soon comes back to its previous habits and overloads the system with information, so that the Verbivore phenomenon inevitably starts again.

At the beginning of the text, a mysterious figure reads several reports made by unidentified subjects about their experiences of the Verbivore crisis. This figure is soon identified as Mira Enketei, the narrator of *Amalgamemnon*, who now conducts a radio programme in which she presents different accounts of Verbivore made by different people. The novel is thus a sort of collage narrative, made up of several short stories or fragments of stories, each told from a different point of view and in a different way: letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, fragments from TV programmes, printouts of recorded conversations, and a radio-play script. *Verbivore* therefore mixes typical eighteenth-century genres – the epistolary novel, the journal novel, and the fictional autobiography – with the new possibilities of story-telling brought about by the technological media – television programmes, radio broadcasts, and word-processed documents. Each “small narrative” is told in a different linguistic style, so that, even if the novel never explicitly refers to the change of focalization, the reader can nevertheless recognise the shifts of viewpoint thanks to

the different idiolects employed, their use of grammar and orthography (correct or less correct), their linguistic inflections and rhetorical tones.

The situation, however, is complicated by the fact that Mira seems not only to assume the typical role of the omniscient narrator, but also to play with Genette's theory and provide what he defines as "paralepses" (Genette 1972 211), i.e. pieces of information which could not be available to the narrator. She does in fact not only refer to the events recounted in *Xorandor* as if she witnessed them directly, but she also seems to know Jip and Zab in person, although we are told that she meets them only much later in the novel (Cf. V 30, 6, 174). She also seems to know information which only the two twins know in *Xorandor*, as for instance the various attempts made by the kids to contact the stone (Cf. V 173), the secret story told by the stone to the kids (Cf. V 84), or the conversation between the kids and their mother (Cf. V 84). Other characters from *Amalgamemnon* also return in this novel, as for instance Perry Hupsos (a radio presenter in the previous novel) who is now the author of a radio play called "A Round of Silence". Mira could be therefore seen as the fictional "author" of both *Xorandor* and *Verbivore*. Her role seems to be confirmed by the words Mira utters after seeing for the first time a photograph of the small Xor, "It was the first time I'd seen actual pictures, instead of just imagining" (V 176). Other characters also point towards this possibility when they conjecture, "maybe it's all Mira's fault. Probably she imagined the whole thing and it occurred" (V 129), or else when they notice, "she sometimes behaves as if I had sprung ready-armed from her head" (V 88). In light of this insight, we understand that in *Xorandor* Zab already anticipates the idea of Mira's authorship when she tells Jip, "we're characters too" (X 9). *Verbivore* thus retroactively undermines the reader's assumptions regarding the characters-narrators of *Xorandor* and blurs the distinction between the various narrative levels which the three novels – *Amalgamemnon*, *Xorandor*, and *Verbivore* – present. This technique obviously plays on the readers' habit to trust the narrator and to look for the description of a stable reality in a text. What is played upon is the border which divides "real" and fictional within the very fictional text. The characters seem to be, as it was the case in *Thru*, aware of their own fictionality, of being mere letters on a page. In particular, the two main characters in Perry Hupsos' play, Julian and Decibel, are fully conscious of their fictional status. In this way, the

fictionality of the narrative construct is exposed and the fact that “identity is a fiction” constructed by language is once again highlighted.

The main theme of the novel seems to be the possible outcome of the increasing technologization of our society. *Verbivore* shows the possible cultural consequences of a radical change in the communicative means. In the society portrayed, media networks process masses of information which, far from facilitating communication, in reality contribute to people’s increasingly preoccupying isolation in front of their TV sets or computer screens. Moreover, the processed information is soon outdated, so that more up to date information is needed, hooking people continuously in front of their machines. The endless flow of information so much needed by people has replaced human relationships, as Mira clearly explains,

our minds and psyche, our entire nervous system and networks of expectations have been transformed by the media [...] We depend on the media for our life-blood, the stream of information, the adventures, the violence, the romance, the games, the idols, the beauty, the knowledge, the gossip, all that Plato called Love Truth and Beauty, the explanations, the wooing of our beliefs, the eternal commentary that lines our lives like a loving companion, a double, making sense of it for us in its fragmentary and fragmented fashion. (V 30-31)

Mira’s words reveal how the “double” of the media has replaced real human relationships: computer processing has replaced dialogue and direct contact among people. This clearly recalls Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, i.e. the idea that our culture is essentially unreal: we live in a world of signs in which we mistake simulacra for real things. Notwithstanding our impression of being dynamically living into vast information networks, the reality of things is much less positive: we passively incorporate data and become more and more isolated in front of our television or computer screens. We are, as Baudrillard saw, slaves of the process of alienation brought about by technologization, i.e. “of the generalized pattern of individual and social life governed by commodity logic” (Baudrillard 1998 190-91). For Baudrillard, the society we exist in is one “where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning”. The loss of meaning is engendered primarily by the media, which are “producers not of socialization, but of exactly the opposite, of the implosion of the social in the masses” (Baudrillard 1994 79, 81).

Verbivore depicts the age we live in as one where technological innovations are increasingly overtaking the printed medium. The effect of this overexploitation of electronic networks to the detriment of the written medium is that our ability to think

individually and communicate is decreasing. In the novel, Zab significantly asks, “What have we lost [...] since the disappearance of books? Everything being on hard disc or diskette now” (V 38), whilst another character, Tim, explains how we live in “A simulated world, like those that computer produce”. As he further explains, in our society,

The population has learnt to live on abstractions and interpretations of the world as presented by a few [...] They have forgotten the smell of sawdust and leather and dung and sweat, the feel of gnarled wood, of a cow’s udder, the taste of unchemical tomatoes and wild bilberries, the sight of clear water, the sound of crickets and birdsongs. (V 92)

Tim also describes cybernetic abstractions as the causes of mental and psychological degeneration, “We’ve become stunted human beings. Loss of senses and muscle through the media, loss of memory and logical capacity through computers”. For him, “the so-called civilised populations” have become only “stupefied incompetents in acute media-withdrawal” (V 92).

Word processing has brought about a fundamental change in the way we perceive the act of writing: it is nowadays extremely easy to erase a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire story and substitute it with a new one. The novel thus depicts a society where printing has become outmoded: books are sold in diskettes and they can be modified at will. No one version of a story is final in an era of complete computerization. Cybernetic texts are subject to continuous changeability. The novel thus addresses the idea Richard Lanham brings forward, namely that the cybernetic technology will indelibly alter our notion of text. For Lanham, “the electronic word has been producing profound changes in the outside world [...] Sooner or later, [...] electronic ‘texts’ will redefine the writing, reading, and professing of literature as well” (Lanham 1993 3). Digitized communication will unavoidably force “a radical realignment of the alphabetic and graphic components of ordinary textual communication” (Lanham 1993 3), for the textual surface is no longer unchangeable by the reader, but it is rather “malleable and self-conscious” (Lanham 1993 5).

In *Verbivore*, this situation is shown to have deleterious effects on people, for their individual creativity and uniqueness is being gradually lost. As Mira explains, “Gradually all our secret treasures have been removed and we’ve all been made to share the same abstracted and alienating public knowledge” (V 111). As Brooke-Rose clearly puts it in an interview,

the crisis today is that we have fictions which no one admits to be fictions, whereas people before had myths, people had religions, and so on, and a lot of it was believed in as a matter of faith, [...] now everything is presented as real, and it is no more real than the myths of before. (Hamilton)

With the advent of the *Verbivore* phenomenon, people are required to go back to the written medium. In doing this, they are forced to employ once again their personal imaginative abilities: in order to write their reports, they have to rely on their almost forgotten creative faculties. They start writing “screen-diaries” or “mimic minimemoirs” (V 7), and gradually seem to rediscover the *pleasure* which derives from the use of their individual cognitive resources. For instance, Zab starts noting facts on her word processor and declares, “clearly I am deriving pleasure, just as fiction-writers used to, from the mere noting of facts, instead of getting to the point” (V 37). The imagination of the various characters-reporters is necessarily reactivated. In fact, the shift from one narrator to the next is first *imagined* by the narrator of the moment and then actualised: Mira for instance imagines what Zab must be writing, and then we are reading Zab’s words, who in her turn imagines what Jip must be writing, and then their mother, Paula, Perry, Decibel and Julian, and finally Mira again. When Zab imagines transcribing Jip’s diary, she soon stops and recognises, “No, he wouldn’t say all that” (V 54). Similarly, it is Jip who starts imagining his mother’s thoughts, and asks himself, “why am I writing all this out as if I were trying to assimilate myself to her? Are these increasing breaks in our daily fictions turning us all into d.i.y. fiction producers? Which, Zab would cut in, we’ve all been all along anyway” (V 75).

As shown by the above quotations, *Verbivore* continuously reminds its readers of its own status of fiction, but also shows how the act of creating fiction, of story-telling, is able to reactivate the lost imaginative ability which the advent of the oral media had cut off from society. The habit of passively absorbing heaps and heaps of information is contrasted with the activity of writing one’s own perceptions and ideas, an activity which obviously forces people to think for themselves and be creative. In this way, the novel posits the possibility of a shift from second orality to second literacy, a situation in which society would be once again forced to rely on the written method, since the orality of computer technology has failed. *Verbivore* shows how the written codex reactivates a human force which the oral media tend to repress. Outmoded at the beginning of the novel, writing is necessarily rediscovered,

bringing about a renewal of the creative abilities of the human mind. The reader is constantly reminded that one of the characteristics of the novel is its ability of mixing fantastic and realistic elements, i.e. that narrative sets free our ability to create and imagine. For instance, when Zab meets Decibel – an overtly fictional, “unreal” character as we will see below – she thinks she must be dreaming, and when she relates her encounter to Jip, he tells her that she must be doing so, for “only dreams mix real and fantasy items” (V 139).

However, it is necessary to make clear that the novel does not seem to advocate the return to the written method as a complete abandonment of the oral culture. The aim of the novel is rather that of deconstructing their binarism. In our society, orality has taken more and more over the written text, and in order to oppose this state of things and find a reequilibration, Brooke-Rose tries to subvert their dichotomy. The novel demonstrates that writing is a medium which retains communicative possibilities which the oral media do not possess, and that therefore the written word still retains an important role in contemporary society, but it also shows that the two media (oral and written) are inextricably interrelated and interdependent. The written text can and should incorporate in itself elements of the oral culture, while people should recognise the importance of the act of writing as a creative process of the subjectivity. As Ong makes clear towards the end of his already cited work, “Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness” (Ong 1982 175). In fact, in *Verbivore*, written and oral texts inextricably mingle with each other: we have many transcriptions of dialogues, and although the written vehicle is shown to possess a fundamental role in our culture, it cannot abstract from the oral media. This is made clear by Mira as she says,

If the eternal commentary disappears altogether in this way [...] won't mankind go slowly mad? Or shall we simply turn back to reading and writing and talking and behaving as if the media had never been? But that's no longer an option, I believe, our minds and psyches [...] have been transformed by the media. (V 30)

The second literacy which is hypothesized in the novel could not do without the oral medium. The fragments of fictions the characters create are necessarily dependent upon the technological advances of our age. This is particularly made clear by the two main characters of Perry's play: Julian, a young man who is writing a thesis on “neopostdeconstructionism”, and Decibel, a voice in his head which he hears during his convalescence in hospital after an accident. Julian needs and wants

silence, whilst Decibel feeds on noise. Even after the radio play has finished, Julian and Decibel continue to appear in the novel. Julian will eventually decide to write a novel (Cf. V 82), and Decibel will declare that “Writing is [her] natural enemy, especially Chinese writing that manages to convey meaning without sound, and groups of entities rather than just one entity” (V 186). It is clear that Julian embodies the figure of the writer, while Decibel personifies his “enemy”, the oral media. However, they are presented as mutually dependent: Julian in fact is aware of the fact that he is a character in a radio play and therefore knows that his life depends on radio broadcasting: Decibel, in her turn, represents the oral media, but she is also conscious of being a written character – she has been invented and written by Perry. This clearly shows how the two apparently opposite communicative means – the written and the oral – are interdependent: they need each other in order to be.

Only the recognition of mutual dependence, exemplified by Julian and Decibel, can bring about renewal in the practice of fiction writing and save society from the risk of completely losing our creative capacities. In a situation of increasing technologization, literature cannot but recognise the role and importance of cybernetics in our culture. Computer technology should indeed be approached as a chance of renewal of literature. In her essay “The Dissolution of Character in the Novel”, Brooke-Rose puts forward the idea that the technological revolution could bring about renewal in the practice of writing, in the same way the invention of the print has done five centuries ago,

perhaps the computer [...] will alter our minds and powers of analysis once again, and enable us to create new dimensions in the deep-down logic of characters [...] a completely different development arising from computer logic but as unimaginable to us now as a Shakespearean character would have been to an oral-epic culture, and a different way of thinking about and rendering [...] all worldly phenomena, as revolutionary as the scientific spirit that slowly emerged out of the Renaissance and the Gutenberg galaxy. (Brooke-Rose 1986 195)

It appears clear how, with *Amalgamemnon*, *Xorandor* and *Verbivore*, Brooke-Rose approaches the changes in our technological society (television programmes, radio-broadcasts, instant word-processing, and apparently fast-expanding communication) and shows how the non-literary forms of representation of the oral media have become in our society power discourses which threaten to supplant the novelistic genre. The three novels seem to simultaneously (1) point out the fictionality of the discourses of authority, (2) show that the risk inherent in them is

that of losing sight of the relevance of the narrative genre, (3) reinstate the proper merits and uniqueness of the novel (creativity, ability to account for ambiguity and paradox), (4) point to the possible fusion of the two discourses (fictional and scientific) in order to reequilibrate the polarities.

The first three novels of the Intercom Quartet explore the cognitive and cultural upshots of modern technological developments and represent an attempt to move in the direction of a reequilibration. If modern technology can represent a danger for literature and society, the incorporation of the technological discourse into the novelistic genre is posited as a possibility of renewal and expansion for both the novelistic genre and human consciousness. By incorporating the discourses of the media into her novels, Brooke-Rose demonstrates that the novelistic genre can be enriched by them, and that the role of the novel in contemporary society is still important, in so far as it evolves to both reflect those discourses and show their possible effects on the human mind.

Textermination (1991) is the fourth novel of the Quartet, and even though it does not address directly the question of computer technology, it does transversely for it focuses on the relationship between fictional characters and readers in an era in which readers read less and less and characters are dying as a direct consequence. The novel centres around an international conference whose participants are fictional characters coming from disparate times and cultures. They reunite at the Hilton hotel in San Francisco, listen to various papers delivered and attend sessions of “pray-ins”, where they pray to the Implied Reader, their God, for their survival. Their lives depend in fact on the reader’s reading/not reading the novels of which they are part. The annual convention is organized by literary critics, and interpreters are employed in order to facilitate communication between the characters.

The opening of the novel describes various journeys made by various characters in carriages – each journey described being itself a quotation from other novels. Subsequently, all the characters embark on an “aerobrain” and fly towards San Francisco. The aerobrain stops over in Atlanta and then departs again. As it takes off, the city is seen burning down, and the reader is presented with another series of quotations of cities, libraries and books catching fire. It is as if the novels of origin of the various characters were burned down, so that they are now free to enter another

fictional world. A huge community of characters coming from disparate narratives is thus drawn together at the convention, from Jane Austen's Emma, Emma Bovary, Dorothea Brooke, Goethe's Lotte (coming not from Goethe, but from Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*), to Fuentes' Felipe Segundo, Gibreel Farishta and many others. Intertextuality is brought to extremes, for not only discourses (as in *Thru*), but also characters interact with each other. In this way, *Textermination* perfectly epitomizes what the narrator of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* sees as one of the main features of the modern novel, namely that characters should be interchangeable among books, and that "the modern novel should be largely a work of reference" (O'Brien 25).

The technique here used by Brooke-Rose is no longer the scientific, objective description of the characters' perceptions, but rather the more traditional one of a third person narrator who describes the events; a technique Brooke-Rose seems to employ because otherwise it would be absolutely impossible to distinguish the various characters. The narrator is Mira, who overtly admits to have invented four novels: "I'm here on at least two counts, I mean I appear in two books, though I invented four" (TX 66), and thus confirms her role of "author-narrator" of all of Brooke-Rose second tetralogy.

At the convention, we witness many incidents caused by the interaction of so many different novelistic realities: Muslim fundamentalist protest during a pray-in session because the session is evidently based on a Christian set-up. Soon after they target Gibreel Farishta and try to strike a terrorist attack against him. The police eventually arrive and investigate the event, but the inspector is no less than Columbo. Later on, we witness a second attempt at disruption made by characters from TV: they irrupt at the convention demanding representation, and quarrel with the characters from written texts on whom is in more need of prayers for survival. Among other events, there is the rebellion of some of the characters against their authors, in particular Oedipa Maas decries the masculine standing of Pynchon and spells out her own feminist stand, while gay characters also protest because of their scarce representation in fictional works. At the end of the novel, a fire burns down the hotel where the conference is being held and an earthquake destroys San

Francisco. The characters, however, are seen as they safely embark the aerobrain to go back to their originary sources.

The various characters' ontological status is obviously problematical from the outset: each of them comes from another narrative, another time and place, and is now part of a new text where a third person narrator introduces them. Upon entering Brooke-Rose's text, however, they do not lose the distinctive traits, qualities and characteristics they possessed in their narrative of origin. *Textermination* becomes a collage of different narratives, one in which the various characters' cultural tropes and systems of belief are irreconcilable. The interaction among altogether different eras and cultures brings about misunderstanding and engenders utterly comical situations. In addition, some of the characters already possessed a dubious ontological status in their original narrative, as for instance Calvino's non-existent knight, Fuentes' Felipe Segundo (from *Terra Nostra*, where Fuentes gives him a different family history from the real Felipe of Spain), or Rushdie's Gibreel Farishta (a film actor and expatriate, divided between two cultures). They therefore add to the already dubious ontology of the novel. We are also presented with different versions of the same characters, in the cases where diverse versions of the same story or a sequel to a novel has been written. Similarly, when a novel has been turned into a film, even characters-as-actors (i.e. neither the characters of the novel, nor the actors in flesh and blood, but the characters the actors interpret) participate in the conference.

Some characters, initially considered "real" people as opposed to the fictitious conference participants, are later recognised to be fictional characters as well. Such is for instance the status of the police inspector (Columbo) who investigates the terrorist attack made by the Islamic fundamentalists against Gibreel Farishta, the journalists arrived on the scene to report the terroristic attack, and eventually the convention organisers and the hotel staff. They are all recognised by the interpreters of the conference as fictive figures coming from different novels or from TV series or films. As the novel progresses, *all* the characters, including the interpreters, will be one by one revealed to be fictional characters. Kelly the interpreter indeed disappears from the text after having read her name, as a representative of *Textermination*, on the list of characters who have died because of the readers'

forgetfulness: “McFadgeon, Kelly. From *Textermination*, by Mira Enketel” (TX 92). Even Mira will eventually read her name on the same list, as a representative of *Amalgamemnon*, and, since “She doesn’t exist”, will therefore abandon her role of narrator (TX 105). If all identities, even those believed to be “real” (policemen, journalists, conference organisers, interpreters, and Mira herself) are shown to be fictional, Brooke-Rose’s texts demonstrates how everything in a narrative is made up of just words on a page: The Cartesian notion of identity is deconstructed as it is shown to be only a product of language, a linguistic construct.

Apart from their highly problematical ontological status, not *all* the characters are formally introduced by the narratorial voice. Mira, in many cases, limits herself to describe the events and give clues as to the characters’ identity. The task of recognising them is thus left to the reader and depends on his/her literary knowledge. In a sense, the reader progressively fills in the “spots of indeterminacy” (Ingarden 249) of the text. It is the reader who activates the gaps the novel presents and co-creates the text together with the implied author. The novel thus foregrounds the active role of the reader in the (re)construction of the text. However, in the case of such an abundant number of characters and such a variety of cultures involved, nobody can virtually recognise all the intertextual references, and the reader will experience both the pleasure of recognition and a sense of loss at not being able to fill in all the gaps. Nonetheless, *Textermination* makes clear that it is neither possible nor necessary to identify all the characters and fill in all the cultural gaps in order to enjoy the text. In fact, it overtly posits its own incoherence and illogicality as the main source of pleasure for the reader: “It’s in illogics that the interpreter takes his pleasure”, for the reader’s task is that of making “the apparently incoherent coherent” (TX 36).

The interpreter Kelly embodies the reader’s frustration at not being able to recognise all the characters. She confesses to be ashamed of her ignorance: “to her horror she doesn’t recognize every name” (TX 22); She weeps and asks herself “What am I doing here? I’m hopeless. I shouldn’t even be in academia” (TX 92). “She feels ashamed and rattled. Gaps, so many gaps in her reading, she’ll never catch up” (TX 22). *Textermination* thus foregrounds, more overtly than any other text by Brooke-Rose, the active participation of the reader in the text, the relationship

between the text and the reader, as well as the intimate dependence of a text's life on its readers.

After Mira has left the convention, another voice assumes the role of narrator and announces, "If she can't go on, I suppose I'll have to. I'm not Mira of course [...] As eye-narrator I've kept pretty quiet, effaced as they say" (TX 106). This anonymous narrator is the implied author, the one who already appeared in *Thru* to play a cat and mouse game with the characters and the readers. The implied author here makes an excursus on the idea of the author's presence in the text and reinstates that the difference between author in flesh and blood and implied author must not be forgotten: the risk is that of "losing an important distinction" (TX 106). This voice then overtly declares to be "not of course the real author [...] but the Author, Implied, Ideal, or whatever [...] I am the author, take it how you will, and I am still alive and well" (TX 106-7).

Brooke-Rose thus reasserts the presence of the implied author in the narrative, showing how this is not the real author in flesh and blood, but a fictional and linguistic construct itself, but inevitably present into the narrative. The implied author then expounds on the critical idea of Implied Reader (Cf. TX 106-107), and makes clear that each possible reading of the text, even that of a critic, is after all always an interpretation: "behind [...] what the author intends, what the text says, what the reader infers, is in every case what one critic interprets. He too is Reader, he too is God" (TX 107). In this way, the text plays with the idea of the "one truthful reading" of a text, making clear that such a reading does not exist: each reading, however accurate, remains an individual interpretation. In this connection, the author reveals, or better confesses, that she herself does not know all the characters she has brought together in her works. In this way, she encourages the reader not to be frustrated about his/her literary gaps, and puts the accent on the enjoyment on the reader's part as the main aim of her novel. Overtly quoting Beckett, this implied author further asserts her own difficulties in the construction of the text and declares, "As to the arranging aspect, I too, like Mira, have no idea how to go on. I must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on (Beckett, *The Unnameable*)" (TX107).

Textermination is clearly different from the other three novels with which it makes up the Intercom Quartet. This novel does not address directly the issue of the

technological revolution, but it sits perfectly within the Quartet as it focuses on the possible consequence of a second orality for the lives of fictional characters: if the reader stops reading literature, characters unavoidably die. The mixture of ontological worlds, apart from being utterly humorous and entertaining, also seems to point to literature as a cognitive activity, an activity able to enrich the human being. The reader is frustrated at not being able to recognise all the different characters, and a possible consequence of this sense of frustration (the result the novel proposes to produce) is that of stimulating the reader to broaden their knowledge, as well as showing the reader how literature can still serve as a cognitive tool, one which can make him/her enter into different cultures and eras and broaden his/her cultural horizons.

The novel which follows *Textermination, Remake* (1996), is an autobiographical novel, but one where the relationship between memory and “reality” is overtly foregrounded as problematical. In fact, while focusing on the personal experiences and memories of the author, the main idea the novel puts forward is one we have already observed in *The Dear Deceit*, i.e. that remembering past experiences and putting them into words inevitably implies a process of reconstruction which transforms the “reality” of the events called to mind. Remembering is always an arbitrary process of interpretation, one which produces a fictionalization of the life the author here tries to recollect: “The old lady’s publisher has asked for an autobiography. But the resistance is huge. The absorbing present creates interference, as well as the old lady’s lifelong prejudice against biographical criticism” (R 6). *Remake* thus puts the accent on the concept of memory and, extremely linked to this, on the role of language in the “creation” of reality. In fact, it is through language that the author tries to put into words her past experiences, but language also and unavoidably transmutes those experiences into something different.

Brooke-Rose adopts here a new narrative constraint: the text is almost entirely written without personal pronouns. The only exception being the third chapter, where Brooke-Rose describes her mother’s death. The use of personal pronouns in this section fulfils the aim of emphasising the author’s strong feelings in relation to the subject narrated, whilst the avoidance of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives

in the rest of the narrative abolishes gender and possessive-power problems, creating a peculiar textual instability. The lipogram strongly concurs to convey the author's position towards the notion of possession and identity. It perfectly exemplifies her rejection of fixed identity and her questioning of the notion of biographical truth, even in the midst of an autobiographical novel.

The old lady wonders whether autobiographical writing is in fact a "remake" or a "self-confrontation", and in the case of a self-confrontation, she asks whether she would "Self-confront many selves or one?" (R 3). At this point already, she admits that the selves to confront would be too many: "the confronter is a speck in time compared to the army of confrontable selves" (R 3). As already done in her essay "Self-Confrontation and the Writer", she employs the Chomskyan "John" in order to overcome the stylistic problems posed by the linguistic constraint adopted. Already at the beginning of the novel, we are told that John has "as many selves as utterances, virtual or realized, as many selves as there are words in lexicons" (R 3). John gets eventually split into many different selves, each with a different personality and a "serial number" which distinguishes him: there is John¹³, the "litcritter" (R 11), John³², the "pedantic" (R 16), John⁴⁵ the "focus-puller" (R 45), John⁵⁶ the "script consultant" (R 100), John⁵³, a "nasty piece of perk, the floor-manager perhaps" (R 107), John "le méchant loop" (R 65), and so on. John's multiplication of identities is also echoed in the names of the other characters in the novel: Brooke-Rose's mother becomes for instance Jeanne, her sister is Joanne, her cousin Jean-Luc, her husbands Jan and Janek, her lovers Jon and Sean, and her friends Janet and Jock.

John becomes a sort of mirror identity through which the author confronts her different selves or the different aspects of her life. John intrudes in the narrative and introduces her many selves, but he is also sceptical and constantly enquires about the truth of her memories, questioning the reality, the trustworthiness of her reminiscences. For example, when the old lady praises her sister Joanne, John immediately intervenes, "Hey, says John⁴⁵ the focus-puller, could the old lady be dubceking memory?". He is implying that her sister exhibited envy towards her as a young girl, but the old lady reinstates that "There was no envy. Tess simply admired. Joanne didn't" (R 45). In another example of this practice, John blames Tess for being personally responsible for her urethro-genital problem, but the old lady soon

makes clear that “John the psycho, the casting adviser” has been taken by his “usual haste to blame Tess not the mysteries of creation” (R 51). John constantly challenges the reliability of the old lady’s memories, while the latter openly admits that her memory might be faulty and that “perhaps the old lady has invented” (R 121). What the reader faces is the impossibility of distinguishing “real” memories from faulty or newly invented ones: the concept of memory is shown to be a treacherous, a deceitful one.

The old lady does not confront only the many Johns of the novel, but she is also confronted by Tess, her younger self. Descriptions of the present life inextricably mingle with events from Tess’ life. The “old lady” now living in Provence goes back to the child and the young girl she was in London and in Brussels. Her earliest memory of singing to her father at the age of two in 1925 is shown to be faulty, as the old lady can no longer situate her reminiscence, places and names inevitably mixing up in her mind: “St. John’s Wood, not Chiswick [...] Chiswick was later. The old lady has no memory at all of St. John’s Wood at two” (R 2). A TV programme about the war triggers her memory of Tess at Bletchley Park, while the new life that Brooke-Rose embarks on when she moves to France is remembered as an adventure,

Tess joins the ’68 generation, the teachers all twenty or thirty, the students all ages but mostly very young, Tess now forty-five, slimmed by illness and crisis, rejuvenated by freedom, excitement, hormones after a hysterectomy [...] A second career, a second life. (R 164)

Unlike John, the name of the little girl is not formally introduced at the beginning of the novel, but only in the fourth chapter, as we are told that “The little girl’s name is Tess. Only a name and memory can tessellate and texture all those different beings, the baby in Geneva, the little girl in Brussels, Chiswick, Brussels, Folkestone, London, and all the others to the old lady in Provence” (R 41). The reference to the verbs “tessellate” (spelt in the novel with only an *l*) and “texture” indicates that life, like fiction, is made up of a tissue of stories and events which the subject(s) sews together in order to form a story, but this is inevitably an artificial operation of collage, of assemblage, for in memory, like in imagination, loose ends unavoidably mix and confuse with each other. Life, like fiction, becomes a text, a network of stories, memories and imagination where the real and the fictitious become one and impossible to distinguish. The novel does not follow a chronological

order, but it rather follows the associations of the lady's mind. Moreover, the steady use of the present tense renders indistinguishable the time-shifts from the present in Provence to the past of the childhood and young age and *vice versa*, thus challenging the boundaries between the present and the past and undermining the very idea of autobiography as a series of events chronologically developing.

The interaction of the old lady and the many Johns in the novel seems to have the purpose of emphasising the bi-focal character of autobiographical writing. If we consider the doubling of the central consciousness into the old lady and Tess, and the multiplication of Johns, however, we could say that Brooke-Rose's autobiographical novel offers a multi-focal point of view where it is impossible to distinguish real events from dreamed, invented, imagined, or faulty memories. Brooke-Rose thus deconstructs, once again, the binarism fiction/reality by showing how the act of remembering always implies that of fictionalising the events in question: each "portrayal" always implies a "betrayal" (R 165).

Challenging once again the autobiographical genre, which would demand a closure with the least distant point in time to the narrating, the final chapter begins with the little girl taking the word and addressing directly the old lady,

Hello, Tess.

Hi, ole lady. Writing nicely?

Nicely? How tell? But writing. Is the portrayal a betrayal?

Always is. For others especially. (R 165)

Tess's words emphasise once more what the confrontation between the old lady and John has been suggesting all along, i.e. that the reconstruction of facts is always an interpretation, a new invention, a fictionalization. The fact that this point is made clear by Tess in first person, shows even more clearly that the old lady's writing is a subjectivization of her own memories: Tess would most probably not share her views and implications. Tess is inevitably a different person from the old lady. Brooke-Rose is clearly deconstructing the notion of fixed identity, as already observed in her previous novels. Here the more so, as she does it in the context of a "should-be" autobiographical work. The artificiality inevitably generated by the arbitrary operation of "life-remaking" is constantly highlighted: the old lady tells Tess that "Memory's [...] a variable geometry" (R 165), and that "Personal relationships, like politics, consist of constantly orbiting blind spots" (R 166). Even the idea of historiographical truth is shown to be, like memory, a fiction. Indeed, if

biography becomes “Bifography”, which is “always fiction” (R 11), history is merely “A sorry series of sad remakes” (R 165). Memory, like life itself, is a fiction.

But the novel also does something more: in line with the deconstructive strategy, it carries out the subversion of the dichotomy fiction/reality in order to reaffirm the importance and the uniqueness of memory. In fact, although throughout the text, memory is equated with various data storing devices such as files, diskettes, or index cards (Cf. R 65, 100, 113), at the end of the novel the narrator will make clear that “Memory is not after all a computer, nor, a fortiori, a diskette or even a card-index” (R 170). What distinguishes memory and renders it irreplaceable is its “sense of time” and its ability to “see [...] smell [...] hear [...] touch or taste the world”. She continues by further distinguishing memory from books and films, for “an image in memory may be different each time and suddenly aggregate others”. Moreover, whilst fiction is “prearranged”, memory is dominated by chance, which is “at the heart of biology, of life”. Memory, thus, “is unique, random and fragile, like life, and like life dies for ever” (R 171).

With a typical operation of deconstruction and *reconstruction*, Brooke-Rose exposes the fictionality of any would-be truthful account of “reality” – in the end, she will admit that “the remake of a life becomes more and more impossible” (R 172) – while reinstating the value of human memory, its importance and uniqueness which derives from its fragility, from the fact that like life, memory vanishes for ever and cannot be replaced.

Brooke-Rose’s subsequent novel, *Next* (1998), leaves behind the media of her “Intercom Quartet” and the autobiographical questioning of *Remake* to approach a different theme. It is set in London and evolves around the experiences of homeless people. The author seems to play with the idea of structural secrets, as there are twenty-six characters in the novel, and each of them bears a name beginning with a different letter of the alphabet. Ten of them are homeless, and the initials of their names spell out among them the ten letters of the top row of the keyboard, QWERTYUIOP. The characters are linked to one another because one of the homeless, a black girl, has been raped and murdered, and the police is investigating the crime.

In contrast to the other novels by Brooke-Rose, which always present indefinite settings, this time the topography of the English capital is traced with accuracy: names of streets, squares, parks and buildings are all presented in the novel, and give the reader a strong sense of following actively the incessant wanderings of the homeless characters, their rounds from doorway doss to street begging to homeless shelter to job centre to park and around again.

Brooke-Rose explores here a different lipogram and writes the entire novel without the verb “to have”. The lack of this verb obviously serves the purpose of expressing the lack of belongings of the homeless: they do not own anything material, and therefore they do not employ the verb to have. Possessive pronouns are also extremely rare in the narrative, and only uttered by the other characters, not by the homeless.

The narrative technique is again that of immediate presentation: the author enters in the minds of her characters and describes objectively their thoughts and perceptions, shifting freely from one character-narrator to the other, as already seen in *Thru* and *Verbivore*. The novel does not present paragraph or chapter breaks and is made up of a continuous flow of words passing from one consciousness to the next without any formal introduction. However, while in *Thru* it was very difficult for the reader to distinguish the various shifts of viewpoint, in this novel Brooke-Rose – as she has already done in *Verbivore* – employs different uses of language to differentiate the narrators. The reader can in fact distinguish the various characters thanks to the their linguistic differences. The varieties of London speech, or “Estuarian” as Brooke-Rose defines it, are carefully registered. Each character employs language differently, revealing various levels of knowledge of English grammar, presenting different inflections and accents, and employing personal rhetorical tones. These diverse uses of the same language, ranging from learned bureaucratese through average standard use to immigrant variants of language, are also phonetically transcribed by the author.

The tone of the novel is much less optimistic than the preceding ones. We’re told that we live in the age of “The end of meganarratives, of all the fictions we live under” (N 202), thus clearly addressing the famous claim made by Lyotard in his *The*

Postmodern Condition, which we will further consider below. Our age is described as the age,

of the death of God [...] the withering of the state, the collapse of communism, the corruption of capitalism, the end of meritocracy [...] the cancerous growth of bureaucracy, eurocracy; the end of the nation-state, of ideology, so they say, though it still misleads millions. (N 202)

It is an age where “There’s usually more than one horror for each letter”: “A for Auschwitz. B for Belsen. C for Cambodia. D for Dresden. For Deportation. E for Ethiopia, for Ethnic Cleansing... F for, what’s F? Famine [...] Fundamentalism” (N 3). In a posthuman age where people are more and more alienated and far away from each other, one of the characters asks: “are we now so dead to it all, like plugged off walkmen, that we don’t hear each other any more? (N 169). In a nation which is founded on the equality of all citizens, where “MEN [are] BORN EQUAL”, we are told that what “the Declaration forgot [is] that a slave is not a national, that a refugee, like a dropout, ceases to be a citizen” (N 2). Recalling *Amalgamemnon*, the society depicted in *Next* is one where most education is useless and people remain unemployed despite their studies (Cf. N 181).

The main theme of *Next* is clearly a social one: the novel overtly condemns the government and the media for the situation in which the homeless are: “Disappearing. That’s what the government wants after all” (N 184), says one of them, while another significantly declares, “If the government states in morphed stats that we don’t exist Then we don’t. Presto! We disappear. We’re words, we’re statistical curves and columns” (N 204-5). Homeless do not exist because the government does not clearly recognise the problem they represent. They are treated as cold statistical data and soon forgotten after the statistics have been drawn. The language used by the government and the media strongly concurs to maintain the problem of drop-outs, for it does not acknowledge their cogent reality, but only furnishes abstract statistical data which does not account for their individual uniqueness and different problems. It is as if these people were refuted recognition of their individual realities.

Apart from overtly criticising the government and the media, the novel also posits the responsibility of each member of society in perpetuating this situation. It shows how people generally act as if homeless did not exist, ignoring a social problem which is in front of their eyes. We are told that “Drop-outs mustn’t be

visible” (N 9), and the accent is often put on the way beggars and rough sleepers on the streets are ignored by passers-by because they are an uncomfortable reality to acknowledge. For example, a man and a woman in a restaurant refuse to help a beggar, Ulysses, and pretend not to notice him (Cf. N 95-96). By doing so, they actually refuse to recognise him as a member of society, and deprive him of his own status as human being. Indeed, all homeless are shown to be deprived of their own identity, as they all appear the same to the people who pass them by and pretend not to notice them. Even the inspector working at the mystery of the murdered girl shows no real desire to solve the case and do justice, for the victim was herself a drop-out of society.

Brooke-Rose’s phonetic transcription of the different levels of the Estuarian dialect seems to have different purposes. On the one hand, it slows down the reader and forces him/her to think and pay attention to what he/she reads. On the other hand, by forcing the reader to pay attention to what differentiates the various characters, it seems to recuperate their peculiar individual dimension. The phonetic transcription shows that, although the homeless look all the same to us passers-by, they are not so: each of them possesses his/her own individuality, education, and past experiences. The reader is therefore forced to pay attention to their differences and recognise their uniqueness. By doing so, the author succeeds in giving a real voice to the speechless figures of governmental statistics, to the reality most people pretend to ignore. The reader, struggling to voice the phonetic notation of their speeches, finds himself/herself imaginatively occupying their minds, sympathetically identifying with them: the text thus succeeds in making readers see things from a different perspectives, from the perspective of the rejected and forgotten. At the same time, the reader is reminded that our “century’s obsessive search for identity [is] just a sick humanoid joke” (N 91), and therefore that it is the individual who believes in the concept of fixed notions of truth and stable identity who is unable to acknowledge the reality of people who, for one reason or another, have become emarginated and do not possess a stable social standing.

Clearly, it is not the first time Brooke-Rose focuses on marginal figures. Indeed, *Out, Such, Between*, and *Amalgamemnon* already approach the narrated from the perspective of the less powerful and different, yet *Next* is distinctive for its overtly

pessimistic tone. In Brooke-Rose's previous novels, linguistic creativity never fails to offer a powerful alternative to the problem posited. In particular in *Out, Between,* and *Amalgamemnon*, the characters positively exploit their position of marginality. They recuperate the creativity of language and subordinate it to their ends, thus showing the possibilities of alternative versions of "reality". In *Next*, it is not so: the figures are marginalised and so they remain throughout the novel. In the end it is sadly stated that for these people there exists "no next, no story" (N 203), i.e. no possibility of going forward from the position in which society has relegated them. The "no story" of the end, seems also to mean that for the first time Brooke-Rose is clearly hinting at the reality of the subject matter treated: it is not a story, it is a social problem we need to acknowledge.

In 1999, Brooke-Rose publishes *Subscript*. The novel describes the evolution of humanity from the moment life began on our planet about 4,500 million years ago – as a cell formed itself out of a chemical reaction – to the appearance of the human race fifty thousand years ago, its first attempts at agriculture and other fundamental steps towards evolution.

The technique is here again that of an objective presentation and internal point of view: it is the author who describes from within the various characters' consciousnesses their perceptions unreflectively. The initial characters of the novel are the primary cells and the prehistoric creatures which populated the earth millions of years ago. They therefore lack the ability to speak and during the first part of their evolution they lack any kind of consciousness. The reader thus follows the development of the species from a single, speechless and unconscious cell, through more and more complex organisms, to the creatures which will give way to the human race.

Brooke-Rose does divide the narrative into chapters, and provides in their titles information on the time elapsed from one section to the next. Although this allows the reader to follow the passing of time, which is otherwise never directly stated, the information given by the chapters' headings is somewhat vague: it does not refer directly to the various prehistorical ages the novel describe, but only to the millions of years which divide each chapter. For this reason, this novel presents, in my view, more difficulties for the reader than the preceding ones (exception made for *Thru*), as

the task of identifying the various creatures and follow the evolution of the species is almost entirely left to the reader. At the same time, this technique seems to have the purpose of stimulating the readers' curiosity: if they want to better grasp the various evolutionary steps, they necessarily have to document themselves, to make and independent research on the subject in question.

The choice of the topic, together with the narrative technique which adopts the strict point of view of single cells, more complex organisms, and then human beings, obviously does not permit the author to mention *anything* that these "characters" would not know by themselves at that time. The novel thus opens with an impersonal (and very poetical) description of a pre-biotic chemical reaction which happens at the time life started on earth,

Zing! zinging out through the glowsalties the pungent ammonia earthfarts in slithery clay and all the rest to make simple sweeties and sharpies and other stuffs. Dust out of vast crashes and currents now calmer as the crust thickens and all cools a bit. Over many many forevers. Waiting. Absorbing. Growing. Churning. Splitting. Over and over. (SS 1)

As the novel progresses, the creatures increasingly acquire self-expressive tools, often passing from a stage of doubt regarding the external entities they observe or feel, to a more conscious state which corresponds to their gradual evolution. For instance, one of these consciousnesses, initially perceives above herself "another sea far up, much paler in tinge and not wet at all. At least, like a sea but not made of water" (SS 26). She gradually realises that this kind of "upper sea can also darken" (SS 27), and that it is a "dry sea made of air" (SS 32), and eventually comes to define it as "the sky up there" (SS 43).

The novel is particularly poetical for its use of language: assonances, alliterations, onomatopoeic words, and an extensive employment of paleontological and chemical jargons which give life to most beautiful and poetic descriptions. At the basis of the evolutionary process lies "the code". It is thanks to the code that the creatures work to mutual advantage. The code registers everything inside the creatures and is the force which drives them towards advancement. Every developmental stage is characterised by specific achievements commanded and registered by the code. By following step by step the advance of the species, its small discoveries, the reader learns to see the whole process from a different, much more poetical perspective, experiencing enthusiasm for the smallest evolutionary steps which are nowadays taken for granted and forgotten. Life on our planet is described

as a course of constant creation and destruction where complete efficiency reigns. Even the initial cell is shown to be a perfect example of efficiency. This first, newly formed cell is soon approached by more and more cells, for only together they can start their journey towards extreme complexity, and it always the code which dictates their evolutionary steps, which make “More and more cells cling[...] together, working together” (SS 8). Four billion years after the first cell’s appearance, the now evolved organism can detach itself from the sea bottom and finally emerge to the light, “up to the surface with what feels like a new imbiber of that life force made by the stuffsacs. And the surface is astonishing. At first eye-ful just above water, the body held up by the new swimflaps” (SS 25).

The seas recede, the masses of land move and rearrange themselves, the evolution of the species continues. Eventually, after another 115 million years, the creatures acquire forward-facing eyes thanks to which they are able to better observe the world. There are no “animals that swim in the air” (SS 62) and the creatures, now staying in tribes, also discover the “pleasure of making noises out of the throat” (SS 61) and learn to communicate with different pitches and lengths of noises. The noises soon become the first fully articulated vowels and consonants, among the general excitement of women who play the game of discovering new sounds,

we can make a different noise by simply surrounding the airy noise with a blocking noise at both ends, as with KEK. or GEG. Or GOG. MEM, BEB, PEP. It all depends which bit of the mouth is closed after the airy noise, and for how long. (SS 109)

One of the main themes of the novel is memory. Like in *Remake*, in *Subscript* Brooke-Rose seems to demonstrate the fallibility of human memory. The characters in the novel often cannot remember precisely certain evolutionary steps or discoveries they accomplished, and they have to admit that such events remain vague in their minds. However, “the code” infallibly registers and remembers everything: the DNA and RNA codes, on which Brooke-Rose already touches in *Between*, are here given full recognition. The code lies at the earth of human existence and development. It is already present in the first cells: “After the sperm cell’s visit the eggcell divides [...] And divides again, and again and again [...] Repeating also the code, with the endless acid strings” (SS 10). The code “forgets nothing” (SS 10). The idea of the code clearly recalls Derrida’s idea of arche-writing as the first and indelible form of writing which lies at the basis of human life. Commanded by the

code, the evolutionary spiral never stops: the prehistoric creatures acquire nails, discover the pleasure of staying close and nit-picking, learn the way to cook raw meat, start walking in erect position, their “fur” thins out and so on. Finally, reasoning replaces instinct, yet it is precisely when the human race can be rightly called such, i.e. during the final 40,000 years of the story, that their behaviour already points to the contemporary sexual politics. In fact, the evolution of the species is approached in the novel from a female perspective. All the creatures whose point of view is adopted are female, as the text clearly states at various times (Cf. SS 95). The gender distinction, very vague at the beginning, becomes clearer as the novel progresses and the first steps towards the contemporary iniquitous treatment of women are made. In particular, it is their procreative ability which puts women in a position of weakness in respect to men. With Motherhood, “the original division of labour between male and female has become even more unequal” (SS 57). This division progressively gives way to women’s exclusion from the most important activities of men, and particularly from their decision making meetings. The novel thus shows how the masculine appropriation of power and the subordination of women find their interlocking roots in prehistory.

With a parallel move, *Subscript* describes women as responsible for the most important ideas which contributed to the evolution of the species, and shows how men soon appropriated these ideas for themselves and refused to recognise women’s fundamental contribution. According to the novel, this has been the case of various ideas and discoveries, among which, to name but a few, that of standing and walking on the back legs (Cf. SS 93), of cooking meat (Cf. SS 119), and that of the “mouth-noise game” (SS 109), which will eventually become language. Notwithstanding women have invented the game of language, male soon take over and marginalise women from their speeches,

males do so enjoy hearing males make speech. So we have to bring them food, up in the mountain cave [...] And naturally we won’t be allowed to be present at their grand decisions so they’ll stop talking as we enter. (SS 127)

This kind of gender exclusion is still suffered by women in contemporary society, and Brooke-Rose had already treated the issue in particular in *Between*. With *Subscript*, she goes back to the very beginning of our civilization in order to show

how masculine discourse dates back to the very moment human beings could be perceptibly recognised as such. As one of the characters says in the novel, men,

never help on women's work, unless it suddenly interests them and then they take it over and call it men's work. That's what Gavrina says, and it's a secret, that women first worked stone, made ornaments, invented slow cooking in the earth, discovered speech, told stories of the clan and prophesied, sang to our young. And other things perhaps. We teach them to speak so they silence us. (SS 191)

In this way, *Subscript* exposes the cliché, still widespread in contemporary society, of women's passivity and lack of creativity, a cliché already exposed in *Between* and *Amalgamemnon*. Despite they have first bred the most original ideas, women are not deemed worth persecuting their insights and get "stuck with the most unchanging tasks, the same old scrapers and footheld choppers. A sitting task, a female task, is the feeling" (SS 107).

Women have been believed to lack the spark of genius which characterises men since the appearance of the human race on the earth: the subjugation of women has now been lasting for millions of years. This issue has been variously addressed by Brooke-Rose in her critical writing. In particular, in her essay "Illiterations", she overtly attacks the widespread assumption that women are not capable of giving life to new ideas and forms of art: if the number of women artists is reduced in respect to men it is not because women are less capable of the spark of genius which characterises men, but rather because they have suffered marginalization for a long, too long time,

It takes centuries, generations of artists being allowed and expected to practice their art and to show themselves practicing it, rather than just looking pretty at a spinet as an asset on the marriage market [...] for a Mozart or a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare to emerge. (Brooke-Rose 1991 253)

Subscript thus perfectly support this idea by showing how the marginalization of women is so much rooted in our culture, that we not take it for granted, mistaking a consequence for an inherent biological reality. Opposing this state of things, the novel prompts us to recognise its real causes, it makes us clearly see that what a masculine society believes to be the real state of things, is in actual fact only a consequence of their masculine appropriation of language and exploitation of power.

In *Amalgamemnon*, Mira had already exposed the "fibstory" to which women have always been subjected. She had also imagined arguing with Willy, counterposing the real causes for women's apparent lack of creativity to his prejudices,

Tomorrow at breakfast Willy will [...] bring out as the fruit of deep reflection the non-creativity of women look at music painting sculpture in history and I shall put on my postface and mimagree, unless I put on my preface and go through the routine of certain social factors such as disparagement from birth the lack of expectation not to mention facilities a womb of one's own a womb with a view an enormous womb and he won't like the countertone at all. (A 16)

In this way, *Subscript* becomes in a sense a sequel to *Amalgamemnon*, for it shows how the history of women's subjugation initiated even much earlier than the classical culture Mira had referred to.

With her last published novel, *Life, End Of* (2006), Brooke-Rose goes back to the autobiographical genre after *Remake*. The novel describes the experiences of the author's old age. Brooke-Rose is over eighty, she is disabled and her bodily coordination, once taken for granted, now appears as more and more difficult to be achieved. Although, as already seen in *Remake*, writing always implies a fictionalization of the events described, when I interviewed the author she explained that the novel is "closer to a diary", for it is the only novel which she wrote as she actually experienced the events narrated: "every idea that I get about a wheelchair or what you feel like when you are ill, it came to me as I lived those things. I think it's the only novel that I've written as I went through those experiences" (Brooke-Rose 2008).

The technique is still the subjective description of the consciousness' perceptions. Her present and past experiences, thoughts and memories are therefore inextricably mingled together. The text presents in minute details the daily trials of what were once little automatic tasks: walking is painful, and standing up without the help of both arms is impossible; she staggers around the house from one support to the next, and her beloved books, which are in the upper rooms of her house, are now inaccessible to her. The social experiences of the old lady's life, now highly reduced, are also described: her meeting with the doctor and the physiotherapist, her relationship with the young lady who occasionally looks after her, and her love of old friends, whom she defines as "T.F.", True Friends, as opposed to "O.P.", Other People (LEO 112). One of the main themes of the novels seem to be, in my view, the way human relationship are ineluctably altered by illness. In fact, apart from describing her condition, the author often stops and ponders on various aspects of her illness, on the consequences it has on different aspects of her life. For instance, she expounds on friendship and on what has changed in her relationship with friends

since she is disabled. She inevitably notices that something changes in other people when one is ill: the individuality which she was once given recognition for, is now no longer taken into account. People see her only in light of her physical difficulties and approach her in a different way: it is as if their respect for her person diminished with the arrival of illness. In the above-cited interview, Brooke-Rose in fact explained,

Sometimes I wrote not at all really what was actually happening but pondering on various aspects of illness: why does one lose one's charm and vivacity, but also why do people take it out of you without realizing it either, they quite quickly sort of lose interest, a sick person is not interesting, and I go into these things, this inability to think what is like to be that person who can't walk and who can't see, and there is no reason why they should, but something always changes when you're seriously ill, in them and in you. (Brooke-Rose 2008)

The old lady is therefore another marginalised figure, one which perfectly understands why she is being marginalised and learns to distinguish true friends from other people. Deprived of the total independence she once used to enjoy, she now withdraws in herself and describes this withdrawal as "the last tiny freedom, the last small piece of autonomy" (LEO 11). Later on, when memory falters, she covertly and humorously addresses the idea of the intellectual closed in his ivory tower (a vision often applied to her by critics) and asks, "Can a black hole become an ivory tower?" (LEO 62). In particular, as the novel progresses and her physical faculties falter, we can detect a certain striving for the right expression we find in Beckett: for instance we are told that the legs "flinch wince jerk shirk lapse collapse give way stagger like language when it can't present the exact word needed, the exact spot where to put the foot" (LEO 9). This sentence strongly recalls those continuously uttered by Beckett's narrators in the trilogy and reveals their same kind of striving for the exact definition or expression.

However, the tone of the novel is much more varied than that of the Beckett trilogy. It varies from the critical and analytical, to the descriptive, to the funny and entertaining. The author changes register from one moment to the other: personal, frivolous, witty, humorous, philosophical, rhetorical, political, historical, technical. The author never abandons herself to blatantly pessimistic considerations, never approaches her situation with an overtly negative attitude: what we have is the lucid exposure of her perceptions associated with an ever-present tongue-in-cheek tone towards the people around her and towards the problems experienced. With the same

tongue-in-cheek tone, she also approaches a variety of topics, from the overpopulation, to the ever increasing power of advertisement, to the decline of grammar as a subject in schools. She also discusses to some length the difference between Narrative and the Speech modes, as well as the role of the author in the text (Cf. LEO 65-69). In relation to this last issue, she reinstates, as already done in *Thru* and *Textermination*, that she is not dead but present in all of her novels as implied author (Cf. LEO 76-77). Her increasing physical difficulties do not prevent her from employing her typical linguistic humour. The novel in fact abounds with a vast range of linguistic puns, as for instance the ones which refer to her cardio-vascular system, variously identified as the “cardiovasco de gamma network”, “Vasco the Qualmer” and “Vasco the Charmer” (LEO 10, 20, 36).

Towards the end of the novel, the computer is dead, and her sight is increasingly deteriorating. The text conveys a strong sense of the approaching end, yet it ends with a multi-metaphorical linguistic pun typical of the author. The phrase “*Les jeux de maux son faits*” (LEO 119) retains in fact the echo of the original phrase from the casino language – *les jeux son faits* – but it also plays on the idea of *les jeux de mots*. Being written in French, it also recalls the typical mixture of languages of the author, whilst alluding at the “French facet” of her chameleonic writing.

Having outlined the main characteristics of Brooke-Rose’s novels from *Amalgamemnon* to *Life, End Of*, it is easy to see that, although the presence of literary theory can be said to be a distinctive feature in most of them, these novels cannot be defined as “critical fiction” or “fictional criticism” in the same way as I have hypothesised for *Between* and *Thru*.

Brooke-Rose’s fictional output subsequent to her first experimental tetralogy, in fact, does not present the *pervasive* presence of theory we find in *Between* and *Thru*. Moreover, these works neither *anticipate* critical theory, as *Between* does, nor furnish an ongoing *critique of theory*, as *Thru* does.

For instance, although *Amalgamemnon* exposes, by means of mimicry and juxtaposition, the prejudices which lie at the basis of our masculine society, *Between* had already done something similar, but it had done it at a time when Kristeva’s main work, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and its deconstruction of feminine identity, was still to appear on the literary scene. From *Amalgamemnon* onwards, the

author explores in each of her novels different themes and with different techniques, but does not anticipate critical issues which will be at the centre of the critical debate in the years to come, as she does in *Between*. Similarly, she neither presents an inextricable mixture of literary theory, nor actively criticises the theories she addresses, as she does in *Thru*. For this reasons, only these two novels can, I believe, be defined as “critical fiction” or “fictional criticism”, with *Thru* in particular representing a climax which will never be touched again in Brooke-Rose’s writing.

Xorandor and *Verbivore* address the theme of a second orality engendered by the increasing technologization of our culture, yet the novels are much more straightforward than Brooke-Rose’s initial quartet (*Verbivore* in particular is perhaps the most “easy to read” of her novels). Although they address a theoretical problem, their theme is much more ready at hand, for they reflect a reality experienced and shared by all members of society. *Textermination* might be said to be difficult for its many references to texts which the average reader might not know, yet the accent on the playfulness of the text points primarily towards the enjoyment on the reader’s part. In addition, the fact the reader must not necessarily know all the characters and the novels they come from in order to enjoy the reading is overtly explained by the implied author in the text. *Remake* presents the subversion of the dichotomy reality/fiction and the deconstruction of the notion of fixed identity and meaning, but it does so in 1996, i.e. at a time when these issues had already been extensively tackled by criticism. *Next* is different from the other novels by Brooke-Rose for the overtly social and practical, more tangible problem it tackles, as well as for its much more pessimistic tone. It explicitly addresses Lyotard’s claim of the end of metanarratives, but again at a time when Lyotard’s theory was widely known, and at a time when society as a whole had begun to sense the end of an epoch which postmodernist theory posits. *Subscript* is highly original in theme and also highly poetical (in my view the most poetical of Brooke-Rose’s novels), but it cannot be said to forerun critical theories. Finally, *Life, End Of* tackles sporadically such themes as the fictionalization of life through writing or the idea relationship between implied author and reader, but it is probably the most personal of Brooke-Rose novels, the “less fictionalised” we could say, and certainly it cannot be said to address critical theories in an innovative way.

This does not mean that the novels Brooke-Rose wrote from *Amalgamemnon* onwards lack something in respect to *Between* and *Thru*, but rather that they are different from them and cannot be defined as “critical” in the way I put forward in this thesis. All of Brooke-Rose’s novels do make the reader see things from a different angle, stimulating him/her to look at things from a different perspective, the perspective of the less privileged term of a dichotomy (male/female, reality/fiction, speaking/writing, rich/poor), yet *Between* and *Thru* not only reflect the theories they address, but also actively contribute to the theory of the time; they vigorously add to their *making*.

Brooke-Rose’s novels, after *Thru*, address literary theory, but do not employ it, as *Thru* does, as their basic *structuring principle*. Theory is clearly reflected by and in them. They address theory and subvert binarism, but do not actively engage with the critical theories they refer to, in the sense that they do not *critically refigure* their tenets. They therefore do not represent an *active critique* of the theories they tackle. They subvert, in line with Derrida’s deconstructive strategy, the dichotomy fiction/reality, classical/modern knowledge, orality/literacy, technological media/human creativity, cybernetic storage devices/human memory. They reassert the importance of fictionality, the role of classical culture in our modern world, the significance of the written medium and its ability to activate our imagination and creativity, the fragility and beauty of human memory, the presence of writing in our most intimate human nature (the code, arche-writing). Yet, they cannot be compared to *Thru*, for in it Brooke-Rose directly and critically targets the validity of the theories the novel addresses. *Thru*, in other words, does not simply employ critical theory, but becomes criticism itself as it goes beyond such theories, pointing, with a tongue-in-cheek attitude, to their inherent risks and possible outshoots. Nor they can be compared to *Between* for the fact that this latter was published in 1968 and presents ideas and concepts which were still to find general recognition in the literary field (in particular Kristeva’s deconstruction of feminine identity and Derrida’s subversion of binarism).

My aim has been therefore that of analysing Brooke-Rose’s initial parabola and approach to experimentalism, from *Out* and *Such*, to *Between* and *Thru*. *Out* and *Such* represent in fact a prologue to the full experimentalism of *Between* and the

unrepeatable climax of *Thru*. From *Amalgamemnon* onwards, and especially after *Amalgamemnon*, Brooke-Rose's attempt towards more readability is evident. *Thru*'s specific focus on critical theory is abandoned in favour of more ready at hand themes. *Between* and *Thru* can, in my view, be defined as "critical fiction" or "fictional criticism", in that they address ideas and concepts which were still to be addressed by criticism at the time they were published. The two novels forerun major critical issues which were to take decades to be fully grasped and tackled. In particular, I remand to the following section for a fuller discussion on postmodernist theory, which I hope will make clear the way *Thru* posits itself as a very original and ahead of its time critique of some of the main tenets of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories, i.e. a critique of the still to come development of postmodernist theory. Before going into the specific of postmodernist theory, however, I will illustrate the two major literary influences present in Brooke-Rose's writing, namely Ezra Pound and Samuel Beckett, in order to show how Brooke-Rose both addresses and surpasses the linguistic scepticism inherent in their *oeuvre*.

Chapter 8

Influences and postmodern nihilism:

Brooke-Rose's distinctiveness and countertendency

This chapter will initially expound on the two major literary legacies evident in Brooke-Rose – Ezra Pound and Samuel Beckett – in order to show how the linguistic scepticism inherent (with due differences) in their works, is in Brooke-Rose's writing both addressed and surpassed into a more enabling view and use of language. I will subsequently draw on the major implications of the postmodernist debate in order to show how Brooke-Rose overcomes the nihilism which she recognises as already inherent in much of the critical theories of the sixties and seventies. By doing so, I will demonstrate why Brooke-Rose can be rightly praised for contributing in a highly original way to the writing practice of the sixties and seventies.

As regards Ezra Pound's influence, Brooke-Rose shares with Pound a deep sense of language's consumption and a strong resolution to renew the way the subject conceives and employs language. Pound felt that language and literature needed to be revitalised, particularly because of his sense that language had been worn out by its misuse in journalism, advertising, and the general state of traditional culture. On many occasions, he expressed his belief that "the press, daily, weekly, and monthly, is utterly corrupted" (Pound 1934a 631), and described the entire cultural system as "a mere matter of successive *dilutions* of knowledge" (Pound 1934a 632). He moved a series of polemical attacks on the present state of culture, criticising the "mental LAZINESS" and the "lack of curiosity" of contemporary society (Pound 1934a 631). He frequently expressed the idea that "literature is a whole, parts of which exist in different languages and are capable of comparison", and attacked the backwardness and ignorance of "professors and publicist cheapjacks" who do not approach literature in this way and "have no ambition above that of leading an easy life and protecting their own ignorance or their own educational limitations" (Pound 1933 318). Pound's "campaign against human deadwood still clogging the system" (Pound 1934a 634) aimed at renewing the way we use and understand language, and consequently the way literature is conceived, produced and approached. His motto "make it new" lay at the basis of his scepticism

about the manner language was employed in contemporary society²⁰. In Pound's view, language had become an instrument of concealment of the horrors of civilization and social problems, rather than a means of clear expression,

As language becomes the most powerful instrument of perfidy, so language alone can riddle and cut through the meshes. Used to conceal meaning, used to blur meaning, to produce the complete and utter inferno of the past century [...] against which, SOLELY a care for language, for accurate registration by language avails. (Pound 1934b 7)

A first step towards the renewal of language was made by the Imagist movement, which Pound co-founded with H.D. and Richard Aldington. Imagists advocated a *direct* treatment of the subject matter, the use of no superfluous word, i.e. no term should be used which does not contribute to a direct presentation of the subject, and the composition of poetry in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome: "The point of imagisme is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image itself is the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language" (Pound 1915 280). After Imagism, Pound's involvement with Vorticism in London (1908-1920), and his commitment to the attitudes and activities of London's avant-garde artists, signed a reinforcement of his critique and his poetic ambitions. A much more violent mode of expression began to appear in his work, paralleling his more and more critical attitude towards contemporary culture. "To the present condition of things [...] we have nothing to say but 'merde'", Pound wrote in the *Egoist* in February 1914 (Pound 1914a 68), while a few months later he would declare: "We will sweep out the past century as surely as Attila swept across Europe" (Pound 1914b 234). The artist is now seen as a "savage" who "must live by craft and violence" (Pound 1914a 68). This violence is evident in such poems as "Salutation the Third", which exhorts, "Let us deride the smugness of 'The Times'", and overtly attacks the conservative literary critic as a "slut-bellied obstructionist", "sworn foe to free speech and good letters", "fungus", and "gangrene" (Pound 1914c 45). Pound's turn to Vorticism was strictly linked to his interest in the avant-garde art of painters and sculptors in London. In the English capital, Pound joined in the discussions on Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism. Particularly interested in the works of Wyndham Lewis and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, he found in their art an innovative strength which functioned as an example for him to develop his new and

²⁰ For a full, published articulation of this position see Ezra Pound, *Make it New*, London: Faber, 1934.

revolutionary ideas in poetry. These artists had rejected the romantic-realist style in favour of geometrical and abstract forms. Gaudier-Brzeska's sculptures presented an extreme geometrization of shapes, whilst Lewis created sharp designs based primarily on the relationship between lights and shadows. By focusing on the abstract relations of lines, colours, planes, and masses, both artists discarded the traditional realist representation of subject matter and the notion of fixed meaning it entailed.

The journal *Blast* was launched in 1914, together with the idea of the Vortex. As Pound explained, the image used by the Vorticist artists "is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX" (Pound 1916 106). The image was thus conceived as a sort of cluster, whirlpool, or Vortex of *concentrated* energy, which contained in itself diverse ideas and concepts: "An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Pound 1914d 154). The aim of the Vortex was to produce a continuously self-renewing expression, to reject mildness and softness, and to create images of geometrical precision, sharpness, and rigidity. The "primary pigment" of the Vorticist artists is the "picture that means a hundred poems [...] the most highly energized statement", whilst the Vortex is precisely "the point of maximum energy" (Pound 1914d 153). To reinforce the vigorous statements made in *Blast*, is the use of typography and layout. The emphasis on the visual is evident in the typography of the Vorticist manifesto, in its large patterns of writing peculiarly arranged on the pages to create intense and dynamic designs (Cf. Lewis 11-43).

In his memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound tried to put into words what Vorticism had given him, and explained that the movement had made him more conscious of the appearance of things, that it had "awakened [his] sense of form", that it had given him "a new sense of form" (Pound 1916 155). The visual art of Vorticism had made him see form in a different way, giving him the possibility of a new perception of form in literature, a perception based on the interaction of lines, colours, and patterns. Already present in the Imagist movement, the spatial concept of poetry was thus brought to extreme consequences by Vorticism. Pound envisaged

the possibility of composing intensive and dynamic poetry as “an arrangement of masses in relation” (Pound 1916 130), a kind of poetry where forms become “planes in relations” to each other (Pound 1916 153).

Drawing on the Vorticist sculptures and paintings, Pound developed a visual/spatial sense of form which became a basic characteristic of his poetics. This propulsion towards the visual was particularly evident in his interest in Chinese characters. His work on Fenollosa’s manuscripts represented indeed a further input towards the understanding of literature as visual display. In 1920, he edited Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. In this essay, Fenollosa clearly saw that, contrarily to our phonetic language, which presents “no natural connection between thing and sign” because the relationship between signifier and signified “depends upon sheer convention”, the Chinese linguistic method “follows natural suggestion”. Chinese ideograms are “thought-picture[s]”, much more vivid and concrete than phonetic language (Fenollosa 8). Ideograms speak “at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds” (Fenollosa 9), giving life to a form of poetry which is “alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated” (Fenollosa 17). The “pictorial visibility” of Chinese characters can therefore produce poetry “with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue” (Fenollosa 24). Moreover, each ideogram possesses a changeable valence which depends on its context (on the adjacent characters), and therefore carries in itself numerous interpretive possibilities. The poet who employs Chinese ideograms, carefully works with juxtaposition, selecting “those words whose overtones blend into a delicate and lucid harmony” (Fenollosa 32).

From his appreciation of both Fenollosa’s insights and the Vorticist visual art, Pound derived his idea of a poetry made up of “physical” objects on the page, a poetry which would be both economical and deeply charged with metaphorical meaning. The *Cantos* exemplify Pound’s “new awakening to form” (Pound 1916 156). In the poem, Chinese characters convey visually – therefore in a much more straightforward way than phonetic languages – their meaning. But the visual display of the *Cantos* is not limited to Chinese ideograms. The poem also includes a variety of elements of rhythm, planes, and colours which interact with each other, becoming

precisely “planes in relation”. The juxtaposition of manifold, coordinated elements reveals Pound’s new sense of form: his mosaic technique mingles quotations, allusions, physical “objects” on the page and different languages, in order to let metaphorical relations of meaning emerge. All the elements of the *Cantos* become “planes in relation” to each other and concur to structure the poem. The same elements often come back in a different context and establish new relations of meaning, so that the structure of the *Cantos* is not only based on juxtaposition, but also on recurrence, on repetition. The necessity of intensity and efficiency in the use of language, which Imagism already advocated, is strengthened by the Vorticist adaptation of the techniques of visual art in literature. Pound did seek a language that learned from visual art, in a sense a language that did not want to be a language, literature that did not want to be literature but sculpture, attaining a more immediate and multi-meaningful level of expression, and therefore renewing the static and abstract use of language which contemporary society suffered from. The “Sculptural feeling” which Gaudier-Brzeska had defined as “the appreciation of masses in relation”, and the “Sculptural ability” which he had identified as “the defining of these masses by planes” (Gaudier-Brzeska 155), are both present in the *Cantos*.

Learning from the concreteness of sculpture or painting becomes for Pound the only way to renew language and literature. Apart from the visual display of the poem and from the different languages which block the reader and stress the form of the signifier, in the *Cantos*, conventional syntax disappears and leaves the place to parataxis: staccato sentences with no coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. The structuring method Pound adopts in his polyphonic poem is the same he advocates for the analysis of literature. On different occasions, in fact, he expressed his belief that literature should be approached with what he defines an “ideogramic” method,²¹ a critical method based not on the general and *abstract* consideration of an author’s standing and ideas, but rather on the *direct* analysis of the textual characteristics and the “juxtaposition of specimens of writing” (Pound 1934a 632) which would implement the appreciation of the specificity of a literary work. This method alone, for Pound, could enhance the understanding of each specific text, as opposed to the contemporary widespread abstraction and cultural laziness.

²¹ Sometimes also spelt as “ideogrammic method” (Cf. for instance Pound 1934b 7).

It appears clear how at the basis of Pound's poetics lies a deep sense of language's exhaustion, abuse and misuse in contemporary culture, together with a strong will to renew the way the individual uses and approaches the linguistic system.

Pound's influence on Brooke-Rose is present in her attempt to free her writing from the static, monolithic approach to language. It is present in her attempt to derive from different languages what can enrich her texts with metaphorical value. The different languages Brooke-Rose employs in her novels also show that "it can't be all in one language", while functioning in the same way as Pound's ideograms, for they "block" the reader and make him/her think. Pound's influence on Brooke-Rose is present in the stress on the signifier, in the visual display of Brooke-Rose's novels, which include Chinese ideograms as well as a vast range of typographical material. It is present in the importance assumed by the form of Brooke-Rose's novels as indissociable from their content. It is present in the fact that Brooke-Rose's writing attains both the status of poetry and that of object on the page. Pound's influence on Brooke-Rose is present in the technique of juxtaposition, which constantly generates new associations of meaning and interpretive possibilities. It is present in the repetition of words and sentences coming back in different contexts and acquiring different connotations of meaning. It is present, in other words, in the highly metaphorical value of the language she uses, in the "tension" between the surface (literary) and the deep (metaphoric) structures. This tension is generated not only by the terms employed and their juxtaposition, but also by the syntax, which is "twisted" in order to provoke different possible interpretations. It is present in the peculiar play with negative and positive statements we find in *Between*, as well as in the play with dubitative adverbs and the peculiar use of conjunctions observed in *Thru*, from which ambiguity of meaning arises. Pound's influence on Brooke-Rose is present in the vast play of intertextuality, which induces the reader to realise that "literature is a whole" (Pound 1933 318) and should be approached as such.

Apart from the technical level (juxtaposition, repetition, use of graphical display, different languages), Pound's influence on Brooke-Rose is above all present in her intention to make her readers *see things in a new way*, to induce them to *slow down and think*, to make them pay *close attention* to what actually happens on the

page. Brooke-Rose's novels force readers to abandon their habit of reading passively, a habit which clearly derives from the realist tradition. This attitude can be better explained by Pound's own words in the "Finale Enfatico" of one of his polemical pamphlets,

I should like to invent some kind of typographical dodge which would force every reader to stop and reflect for five minutes (or five hours), to go back to the facts mentioned and think over their significance for himself. And I should like him to sum the facts up for himself, and to draw his own conclusions. (Pound 1951 17)

Brooke-Rose shares with Pound his sense of language's exhaustion. The cultural situation she observes around her is one of "over-exploitation" of language, which derives from the extenuating critical debate over language and reality (*Thru*), from the misuse of language as perpetrated by the media (*Amalgamemnon*, *Xorandor*, *Verbivore*), from the abuse of language by the institutions of power (*Out*, *Between*, *Next*), from the use of language as a tool of masculine domination (*Between*, *Remake*, *Amalgamemnon*), as well as from the fundamental lack of communication paradoxically engendered by the fast expanding global communicative system (*Between*). In a society where the faith in language as a form capable of producing understanding and communication is crumbling, in a world nevertheless dominated by computer languages and the discourses of the media, where words and contacts amongst people apparently proliferate, but in fact result in basic lack of communication, Brooke-Rose recognises the danger of losing the reliance on such an abused and overworked means. As the author herself explains, in fact, at the basis of her work is the idea of "the fundamental disbelief in words, which we all suffer from with propaganda, publicity and so on" (Hayman & Cohen 9).

In this perspective, she employs the basic tenets of Pound's poetics in order to "make it new". The importance of choosing every single word with attention is evident in Brooke-Rose. She constantly tries to avoid the expected use of language, the cliché, putting herself in line with Pound's aim to create a new language for people to think in. Brooke-Rose's writing stimulates the reader not to take signification for granted, but rather to think over and pay more attention to what happens on the page. Her writing aims precisely at shaking the reader's passive habit of giving for granted their understanding of language. It aims at inducing the reader to conceive and approach language in a different, *active* way. Like Pound's poetry,

Brooke-Rose's novels aim at renewing language at each and every word. Her use of language possesses the same intensity which Pound claimed for the Vortex and for his poetry when he explained that "One desires the most intense, for certain forms of expression *are* 'more intense' than others. They are more dynamic" (Pound 1916 104).

Differently from Pound, however, Brooke-Rose approaches the problem of language's exploitation and misuse in a constantly humorous way. Brooke-Rose recognises the problem inherent in the contemporary, "monolithic" use of language, one dominated by clichés, automatic associations of words, and ready-made significations. Yet, instead of adopting Pound's "violent" and aggressively critical approach towards the present state of things, she exposes the problem in her texts with a pervasive tongue-in-cheek attitude, and approaches the linguistic system with an all-encompassing ethic of playfulness. The persistent linguistic humour of her novels becomes a way to face the question Pound posed, and to renew language by means of a playful exploitation of the possibilities that language offers to recreate itself anew at each and every word.

Brooke-Rose's peculiar humour partly derives from the other major influence evident in her work, that of Samuel Beckett. However, even in this case, Brooke-Rose succeeds, in my view, to overcome the deep linguistic scepticism Beckett expressed in his writing. For this reason, as we will see, she can be said to adopt a Joycean approach to language, even though Joyce does not appear to have a *direct* influence on her work.

Beckett's influence on Brooke-Rose is evident in her flowing syntax, in the sheer flow of her novels which strongly recalls Beckett's monologues. Although Beckett's narrators face the void of language and existence, they continue to narrate in order to keep the void of existence from advancing, often challenging it with their peculiar black humour. The language of Beckett's characters stands for their impossibility of getting at reality, for their impossibility of moving *beyond* the linguistic means. The inability to express is equated to the inability to know, as the Unnamable remarks, "I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak" (Beckett 1979 267). Such an impossibility, however, does not keep the speaker from continuing to talk: "I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never" (Beckett

1979 267). Beckett's narrators keep on talking because talking appears to be the necessary condition for living,

This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says, too old perhaps and too abased ever to succeed in saying the words that would be its last, knowing itself useless and its uselessness in vain, not listening to itself but to the silence that it breaks. (Beckett 1979 281)

Going on speaking means going on living, as the narrator of *How It Is* elucidates: "my life a voice [...] on all sides words scraps" (Beckett 1964 146). Stop talking would therefore equal dying, as the same narrator will recognise: "to have done then at last with all that last scraps very last [...] and this voice to have done with this voice namely this life" (Beckett 1964 157). Beckett's heroes try to find words to express their situation, but words cannot fulfil their aim. Any attempt to articulate reality is vain. For Beckett, the only thing we can achieve is a denial of the human self-deception about language, a confession that language is of no help, and a critique of language and its history. Indeed, what Beckett frames with his language is precisely this human self-deception. His characters recognise that language is the main obstacle to knowing. They keep trying to find words able to express what they want and need to express, but they irremediably fail. They cannot overcome the limitations of language: "All my life long I have dreamt of the moment when, edified at last, in so far as one can be before all is lost, I might draw the line and make the tot" (Beckett 1979 167). The ego can never be known as it has no way of articulating itself. Characters incessantly speak, but their selves cannot be given voice, words cannot describe their condition. No matter how carefully chosen words are, truth is impossible to articulate. As Malone comments, "I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing*. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark" (Beckett 1979 177). The very misunderstanding that the use of language generates is expressed by Malone who, referring to the Saposcats, declares, "They had no conversation properly speaking. They made use of the spoken word in much the same way as the guard of a train makes use of his flags, or of his lantern" (Beckett 1979 173).

In Beckett, silence is seen as the *final answer* to the *failure* of language. Silence over the human condition equates with the despair over the inability to articulate this condition: "My speech-parched voice at rest would fill with spittle, I'd

let it flow over and over, happy at last, dribbling with life, my pensum ended, in the silence” (Beckett 1979 284). Silence, however, is impossible to obtain as long as man lives and is caught up in language: “I know no more questions and they keep on pouring out of my mouth. I think I know what it is, it’s to prevent the discourse from coming to an end, this futile discourse which is not credited to me and brings me not a syllable nearer silence” (Beckett 1979 282). What, in my view, we find in Beckett, is a *closed* circularity: the recognition of the limits of language on the one hand, and a tenacious desire to go on speaking, knowing it is in vain, on the other. In this way, Beckett’s characters succeed in conveying (a paradox in a sense) their situation of entrapment, their condition of impasse.

The same “urge to narrate” of Beckett’s narrators is to be found in Brooke-Rose’s novels, and particularly in *Thru*, where each narrator is revealed to be only a “paper eye”, a fictive illusion sustained in order to keep inventing stories, in the same way as Molloy, Malone, and the Unnamable will be revealed to be just successive paper inventions, puppets created only to continue narrating, empty figures which eventually will point up to their creator, Beckett himself. In *Thru*, characters are shown to be mere verbal constructs; each of them is simply “a well established structure that presupposes a void a fall into a delirious discourse” (T 695). In the same way, in *Amalgamemnon*, Mira continuously invents paper identities and stories by means of language. She will also invent, as already seen, the characters of *Xorandor* and *Verbivore*, but only in order for her own fictive status to be finally revealed in *Textermination*, when she reads her name on the list of forgotten characters and must therefore abandon the convention.

The “fall into language” is an omnipresent possibility in Brooke-Rose’s novels. It is present in *Thru* with its delirious discourse which risks precipitating in the void; it is present in *Between* with its free-ranging syntax and lack of punctuation; it is also present in *Remake* and *Amalgamemnon*, the latter directly recalling in its opening the first line of *Malone Dies* (Cf. A 5). Brooke-Rose’s narrators, like Beckett’s, keep on telling story after story as the only means to go on living, as one of the teachers overtly declares in *Thru*: “I know, it’s a flop. As this one, and the next, redundant but necessary for qualcosa to continue. Narration is life and I am Scheherezade” (T 711).

As for Scheherezade, narrating becomes a way of escaping death: the only thing which matters is to keep inventing stories.

However, although Brooke-Rose's characters seem to embody the same urge to narrate of Beckett's ones, they do so with a different, more constructive and affirmative perspective. For Beckett, narrating becomes a way to keep on living, but with the clear conscience that language can *not* convey the meaning they nonetheless "feel". For Brooke-Rose, narrating becomes a way to keep the reader's pleasure and curiosity alive, and it is in this sense that, in my view, the sentence "Narration is life and I am Scheherezade" (T 711) should be interpreted: what is at stake here is the life (or death) of literary creativity. Continuing narrating is a way to sustain this creativity, not a way to evade the advancing void of existence. In Beckett, despair seems to take over, to outrun humour. The trilogy finally conveys the sense of solitude of its narrators trapped within their own skull or within the closed spaces of their rooms. It conveys the sense of the solitude of the modern mind, as its narrators cannot escape their "prisons", for they cannot know and communicate their selves. In Brooke-Rose's novels, differently from Beckett's, there is no sense of "entrapment", of being trapped in language's *impossibility* of expression. Although there is a strong sense of the void of language, this never takes over, never diminishes the creative possibilities of the linguistic means. On the contrary, the discourse becomes the more delirious and playful precisely because it plays on the *verge* of the void. Brooke-Rose develops Beckett's "obstinate humor in the face of despair" (Hayman and Cohen 14) for her own ends: through humour, her language assumes a more positive and enabling valence. In her novels, humour predominates and offers a way of *facing* the void of existence. Language, creativity, and linguistic humour retain a strong *oppositional* power against the lack of foundations of existence. In Brooke-Rose, humour possesses the ability to save the subject from a monolithic approach to signification. Brooke-Rose's characters offer an example of creative use of language, a use which enables them to escape the power logic of signification and the concept of fixed meaning that such a logic entails. Brooke-Rose offers an example of creative exploitation of language by means of which the subject is able to express its own individuality. The reader of *Thru* is continuously reminded of the *void* which language entails, the void that any linguistic structure presupposes: "every structure

presupposes a void, into which it is possible to fall” (T 705). The fall into language, however, is in Brooke-Rose a fall “into delirious discourse” (T 705). In *Thru*, the reader is shown how the void of language can be played upon, how it does not necessarily lead to despair about the impossibility of discovering fixed meaning. With the play of language, the subject reaffirms itself: no longer passive receptacle of a meaning which comes from outside the individual, the human being has the chance of using and enjoying language, the chance of creating a delirious discourse which will again posit the subject as the dynamic creator of a linguistic act. The fact that language does not express fixed meaning acquires a positive valence: instead of despairing, we can play with the undecidability of meaning and enjoy the plurality of existence.

In particular, far from implying that communication is not attainable, Brooke-Rose surpasses Beckett in that she reaffirms the referential value of language. Even in the face of the difficulty of representation (the world is unknowable, meaning continually slips away, there is no transcendental signifier, everything depends on interpretation), representation is not deemed impossible by Brooke-Rose. On the contrary, it is thoroughly reaffirmed. This reaffirmation of language’s representative function is countertendential to the critical panorama of poststructuralist theories which emerged in France at the end of the sixties, as I will extensively consider below. For the moment, it will suffice to say that, if Beckett denies ontological certainties and posits despair as the outcome of the loss of ontological stability in the contemporary world, Brooke-Rose denies any ontological stability, but *not* the ability of language of representing this instability. In fact, if on the one hand her characters acknowledge that “reality [...] merely seeks to appear true [...] the signifier of signifiers beneath which the truth escapes” (T 727), on the other hand they also recognise that “Language is all we have to apprehend reality, if we must use that term” (T 642), as already lengthily explained in the course of our analysis.

This basic difference between the two authors probably derives from the impact which the War and the existentialist philosophy had on Beckett. He lived in France throughout the debilitating period of the Second World War, experiencing in first person the traumatic German invasion of Paris. Referring to this experience, and to the reality of the concentration camps which later came to light, Adorno says that

“Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps” (Adorno 1973 380), for although he never mentions it, the reality of the War is ever present in his works. In Adorno’s view, Beckett never mentions this reality because words cannot but be silent in front of such a horror. For Adorno, by totally negating the world as it is, Beckett negates its false and diminished positives. Consequently, Beckett’s despair is in a sense not really despair, but an effort to confront the world which produced that despair. As Adorno explains, in Beckett

nihilism implies the contrary of identification with nothingness. To Beckett, as to the Gnostics, the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet. As long as the world is as it is, all pictures of reconciliation, peace and quiet resemble the picture of death. (Adorno 1973 381)

Adorno’s view of nihilism as a “positive” approach is in my view disputable. I will, however, consider the concept of nihilism later on in this chapter. For the time being, what is important to make clear is that Beckett can, in my view, be interpreted as an example of increasing despair, most probably deriving from his experience of the War and the influence existentialist philosophy had on him. In Paris, in fact, he was in strict contact with the philosophy of Sartre and Camus. Existentialism conceived man as ultimately alone, a solitary island in a world from which God has vanished. In a world devoid of any external significance, the single individual acquires absolute freedom to act. This freedom undoubtedly represents a chance for the subject to act independently and to self-determine itself through its free choices. However, at the same time, such an immense freedom, together with the loss of any foothold, of any source of value which comes from outside the individual, can easily throw man in a state of deep-seated fear of void, of radical anguish. The course which Beckett seems to take from the premises of existentialism is one of despair and pessimism, whilst Brooke-Rose opts for a more positive approach to the lack of foundations of “reality”. This point would, again, require us to enter into the specific context of the postmodern debate which evolved around the lack of foundations of our world and which we will consider in depth below.

Beckett’s career moves from a Joycean play with language, and across languages, in his earlier fiction, to a much more resigned or tired, and very pared down and sparse later drama. In fact, at the very beginning of his career, in his essay in defence of Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, Beckett praises Joyce for his use of

language: “This writing that you find so obscure is a quintessential extraction of language” (Beckett 1972 15). In Joyce, he explains, words “are alive. They elbow their way on to the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear ” (Beckett 1972 16). Already in his critical work on Proust, however, Beckett is concerned with the problem of language’s ability to convey “reality”. Despite Proust’s own accomplishments, and although the latter has given form, through his writing, to the dilemma of life, Beckett sees that words cannot define, pin down, this dilemma: “Reality [...] remains a surface, hermetic”, “We cannot know and we cannot be known” (Beckett [1931] 1957 56, 49). Already at this stage in his career, Beckett envisages the failure of language to articulate the human experience: “There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication” (Beckett [1931] 1957 47). The problematic relationship between subject and object of representation is clearly addressed:

Imagination, applied – a priori – to what is absent, is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real. Nor is any direct and purely experimental contact possible between subject and object, because they are automatically separated by the subject’s consciousness of perception. (Beckett [1931] 1957 56)

In 1937, in a letter to Alex Kaun, Beckett clearly expressed his view of language as an operation of ceaseless unveiling that reveals only further veils, as reality remains beyond the reach of the subject and yet the subject cannot abandon the urge to capture it. Representation is impossible, as it fails either to retrieve the object or to abandon it (Cf. Beckett 1983 171-72). On many other occasions, Beckett lamented that the essence of the object cannot be represented, it is absconded from representation: “Car que reste-t-il de représentable si l’essence de l’objet est de se dérober à la représentation?” (Beckett 1983 136). Facing the impossibility of representation, Beckett’s narrators talk in order to distract themselves from their loneliness and weakness. Articulating words and narrating becomes a way to try to turn a blind eye to the void which constitutes reality, to the “black void” (Beckett 1979 278) of language. The void, however, remains ineluctably there: endowing reality with meaning and sense by means of words is a chimera; communication cannot take place by means of language.

As already explained above, the possibility of falling into the void of language is ever present in Brooke-Rose’s works, but rather than mere despair and exhaustion of possibilities, her works convey a sense of *new* possibilities, a sense of freedom

obtained by twisting language beyond its limits. Her characters face the void of language, but find a way of overcoming through the continuous and “delicious/delirious” play of the signifier. Like Beckett, Brooke-Rose undermines the ideas of logical coherence in narration, formal plot, regular time sequence, and psychologically explained characters, but she concurrently surpasses Beckett’s sense of despair and endows her characters with the possibility of *representing* their own lack of fixed identity, with the chance to play with it and attain a new degree of self-expression. Brooke-Rose, therefore, appears not to share Beckett’s lack of faith in communication. This is also corroborated by the author as she explains, “man is a social animal and we do have to communicate. We can’t just stay within our shells. I don’t want to get on to this thing of noncommunication” (Hayman and Cohen 18).

Obviously, Beckett cannot be seen as an example of *mere* bleak despair. There is not only despair in his works, but also a peculiar black humour and most striking and beautiful descriptions, which in a sense contradict his tenet of non-communication. For his narrators, however, humour becomes a way of *escaping* the void, but only temporarily: they unavoidably face, again and again, the hopelessness of overcoming this void and the unfeasibility of representation. Differently, for Brooke-Rose, humour does not represent an *escape* from the lack which lies at the heart of reality, but rather a way to positively *face* it, as already extensively demonstrated in the sixth chapter. By playing with the linguistic system, by producing a delirious discourse which offers endless interpretive possibilities, Brooke-Rose’s characters face the void of reality and reinstate the representational ability of language, even in the face of its referents’ ontological uncertainty and instability. Language, for Brooke-Rose, can still *touch on the essence of things*, as Larissa argues in *Thru* (Cf. T 640), even though the essence of things lies in the infinite referral and deferral of signifiers which constitute language. The eternal game of language is conceived, in Brooke-Rose’s writing, as a way to cope with the lack at the hearth of the reality, as *Thru* puts forward: “It is the pain [...] and pain [...] has to be lived through, and you could cover pages and maybe you do, rehandling the signifiers into acceptability and even amusement so that at last it vanishes like delight” (T 690). Brooke-Rose makes the best of the humour she appreciates in Beckett: through humour, she utterly overturns the despair in the face

of the void of existence. In Brooke-Rose, Beckett's influence is evident in the persistent possibility to fall in the void which language presupposes, a void in which her characters risk to fall because of their continuous linguistic flights. Brooke-Rose, however, surpasses Beckett's pessimism and reaffirms, in line with Joyce, the possibilities of language. By celebrating the richness and creative possibilities of language, she counters Beckett's pessimistic attitude, his focus on the *impossibilities* of language, on its failure and poverty.

In this light, Brooke-Rose's writing could be put in direct line with Joyce. What crucially links Brooke-Rose to Joyce is certainly the extensive use of linguistic puns, of different languages, the "musical flow that flatters the ear" (Jolas 89), and above all the positive approach towards the linguistic means and its possibilities. Like Joyce, Brooke-Rose "has recognized the autonomy of language", i.e. that "The epoch when the writer photographed the life about him with the mechanics of words redolent of the daguerreotype" has come to a close (Jolas 79). She has recognised that the old, realist use of language is no longer apt to express the new reality. But far from precipitating into despair, she subverts the orthodox use of words and shows how much is contained into a single word. She shows, like Joyce, that language is not a static system of signification: language is alive and can be twisted in order for the subject to express its creativity. In Brooke-Rose, as Jolas recognised of Joyce, "language is being born anew before our eyes" (Jolas 89). Her language is "a language of a certain bewilderment, to be sure, but of a new richness and power for those who are willing to enter into the spirit of it" (Jolas 90).

Whilst in Beckett we find a strong critique, or better a refusal of the traditional subject/object relation, as the subject cannot achieve knowledge of the object (and of itself as object represented) by means of language, in Brooke-Rose, the relationship between subject and object is addressed and subverted into a critique of their dichotomy. Subject and object are revealed to be one and the same thing. In *Thru*, the dichotomies master/slave, subject/object, narrator/narrated, are playfully subverted in line with Derrida's deconstructionist theory. The same happens in *Amalgamemnon*, where the distinction between creator and created, subject and object of representation, is increasingly blurred.

In actual fact, the blurring of the subject/object relationship which Brooke-Rose fully enacts is already envisaged by Beckett. In fact, although the language he conceives remains a veil between the object and the subject of representation, a veil which must be torn asunder in order to get at the things (or the nothing) which lies behind, Beckett also seems to look at other artistic forms in order to find new literary pathways. In the already cited letter to letter to Alex Kaun, in fact, Beckett envisages a form of literature which would posit no distinction between form and matter, one which would learn from other arts and blur the subject/object relationship,

more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [...] Let us hope the time will come [...] when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralytically holy in the vicious nature of the word that is not found in the elements of the other arts? Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses, of Beethoven's seventh Symphony, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence? (Beckett 1983 171-72)

Beckett looks at music and painting in order to approach the problematic relation between the means of representation and the object to be represented. He is clearly arguing that literature should catch up with visual arts. He is calling for a form of literature which would employ language in a similar way as the other arts. Since we cannot obliterate language completely, a new way to use it would be that of concentrating self-reflexively on the limits and processes of representation, thus blurring the distinction between subject and object of representation, and therefore between form and content. As Lloyd hypothesises, "the counter-analogy with music and painting suggests that he may already be grasping for a notion of an art in which there is no distinction between form and matter" (Lloyd 469). For Beckett, this would be the highest goal for the modern writer. In this light, the "visual literature" of Brooke-Rose, which is obviously a way of blurring the distinction between form and content, can be considered as achieving that rejuvenation of language and literature which Beckett already envisaged.

What Brooke-Rose seems to unite in her writing is thus Beckett's sheer flow, the flowing syntax, the peculiar musicality of his monologues, together with the blurring of form and content which Beckett envisages above and which is

engendered by the visual display of Brooke-Rose's novels. She also positively employs Beckett's "humour in the face of despair", for she subverts despair into a playful reaffirmation of the possibilities of language. To all this, must be added Brooke-Rose's belief, in line with Pound, that a more *precise* expression, one which continuously self-renews itself (as in Pound's *Vortex*), and constantly tries to avoid the cliché of bourgeois society, is the basic means to fight the abuse and misuse of the linguistic system which our culture suffers from. Pound's careful choice of each and every word, together with Beckett's humour, with a Joycean employment of pun and linguistic creativity, become the main traits of Brooke-Rose's writing.

Brooke-Rose, however, does even more. In fact, far from being merely humorous, her novels deconstruct – through humour – the dichotomies which lie at the basis of the monolithic and orthodox use of language she observes around. As already said, at the basis of her writing there is a clear feeling of language's exhaustion. This feeling clearly appears in all of Brooke-Rose's novels and is transmuted into an implicit critique of the misuse of language in contemporary society. Her novels, in fact, expose the logic which lies behind the way our society employs language. They critically target various uses of language: the language of a coercive society in *Out*, psychoanalysis in *Such*, the discourses of masculine power in *Between* and *Amalgamemnon*, literary critical theories in *Thru*, the language of the media in *Amalgamemnon*, the language of computer technology in *Xorandor* and *Verbivore*, the governmental use of language in *Next*. These novels demonstrate that *reality is entirely constructed through language*, and that the way we use language determines the way we look at reality and conceive it. They thus exemplify Brooke-Rose's belief that "certainly all around us language is just falling to pieces" (Hayman & Cohen 10). However, they carry out a double task: while demonstrating the powerful role that language has in shaping our reality and therefore the way language strongly influences, or even determines our lives, Brooke-Rose's novels also exemplify the way the subject can free itself from the power mechanism which lies at the basis of these linguistic systems. They show that if language is a system, its codes can be played on, rather than destroyed. They show that, by playing with language, the subject can attain a new degree of freedom and creative self-expression.

In other words, if at the basis of her practice clearly lies the sense of language's overexploitation and exhaustion, the author tries to find a solution to the threat represented by what can be called the "power-use and misuse" of language. She approaches language with an ethic of intelligent playfulness. Whilst showing how everything is a product of language and exposing the linguistic mechanisms of control which bear upon the subject, she also shows her readers the way they can free themselves from the monolithic logic of the dominant language.

Having explained how, in my view, Brooke-Rose surpasses the linguistic scepticism inherent in Pound's and Beckett's writing, I will now draw on the postmodernist debate and situate Brooke-Rose in relation to it. In doing so, my aim will be less that of providing a comprehensive analysis of a wide-ranging and well-known debate, than that of supplying a specific background from which the understanding of Brooke-Rose's fiction and my claim of a countertendential standpoint in her writing would benefit.

The term postmodernism and its implications have been at the centre of critical attention for the last forty years. Far from being a systematic theory or a unified socio-cultural movement, postmodernism, as Bauman puts it, "means many different things to many different people" (Bauman vii). It is a complex and multiform mode of thought which resists any reductive and simplistic explanation, and whose definition has been the focus of a particularly alive and prolific critical dispute.

The postmodern debate first originated in the aesthetic field and was strictly linked to the emergence of literary experiment. Olson, Sontag, Robbe-Grillet and Barth were among the first to expound on this new form of literary exposure, as already observed in the first chapter. The debate also bred on the poststructuralist theories of such figures as Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Irigaray and others, whose ideas we have extensively considered in the course of this dissertation. Having originated within the aesthetic field, the term postmodernism, however, gradually acquired a much more comprehensive meaning as it got charged, all the way through the seventies and eighties, with implications coming from disparate fields of knowledge. The term came to identify, widely speaking, the socio-cultural condition which emerged in the Western countries during the second half of the twentieth century. One difficulty in defining the term nowadays, derives precisely from the fact

that the phenomenon has come to stretch across a number of different disciplines to which the literary output is intimately tied up, and which therefore it is impossible to separate from literature/literary criticism with a cut line.

The most basic tenet of postmodernism is the claim made by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979. In his famous work *The Postmodern Condition*, he analyses the way the legitimization of knowledge has changed in our Western society. Lyotard puts forward the idea of “the decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives” (Lyotard 1986 38) of the Enlightenment, such as reason, truth, god and history. The metanarratives on which the Western culture was once built have now collapsed, leaving a void where knowledge seems to find no longer any legitimization. What he defines as the postmodern condition is thus the essentially different attitude to knowledge of twentieth century society. The fall of grand narratives has left us with little narratives, i.e. Wittgenstein’s “language games”, limited contexts in which there are clear, if not clearly defined, rules for understanding and behaviour. In actual fact, already in 1947, Adorno and Horkheimer, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, criticise the Enlightenment values as responsible for the wreckage of the Western world. They see how the “happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things”, which the Enlightenment’s grand narratives of progress and justice once bred upon, have now collapsed. After the Second World War, and with the reality of the Holocaust coming to light, they observe how “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (Adorno and Horkheimer 3). In the same year, in his work *A Study of History*, the historian Arnold Toynbee declares that the Western world is about to enter, after the second world war, its final phase, an era of irrationality and helplessness (Cf. Toynbee 1963). Although not postmodernists, Toynbee, Adorno and Horkheimer can be seen as part of the broad process which takes place across the twentieth century and which sees the assumptions of the Enlightenment collapsing upon themselves. They undermine the grand narratives of reason and truth post Second World War and post Holocaust in ways that have similarities to Lyotard.

Another major thinker of postmodernism, whose work is characterised by an ongoing critique of fixed notions of truth and universal categories, is Michel Foucault. He condemns in particular the idea of a phenomenological and universal

subject as the source of knowledge of the world. He opposes the idea that reason is synonymous with truth and that it represents a solution to social problems, noting how repressive social systems are generally highly rational. Opposing the equation of reason and truth, Foucault analyses the production of different forms of knowledge in terms of discursive practices, i.e. specific sets of rules which engender different types of knowledge. He sees the subject as the product of the relation between power and knowledge: the mechanisms of power produce different forms of knowledge which collate information on people and which have the effect of further reinforcing the exercise of power. The subject is controlled, or rather *constituted*, by the discourses of power. Power is thus exercised at the level of social relations and is omnipresent in the social body. For Foucault, the will to exercise power outdoes humanitarian egalitarianism: even the Enlightenment reliance upon universal principle and reason is always incipiently totalitarian. Foucault's concept of subject, central to postmodernist thinking, challenges the individualist rationalism and its emphasis on personal autonomy.

The postmodernist question also proliferates in the works of Jürgen Habermas, Louis Althusser, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Fredric Jameson, and others. My aim, however, is not to furnish a comprehensive account of a wide-ranging debate, but rather to extrapolate from it those notions and issues which will serve my aim of positing Brooke-Rose's writing as a positive countertendency within postmodernism as a mode of thought. In particular, I will address (1) the issue of the proliferation of theories engendered by the postmodernist debate, and (2) the nihilistic attitude which its main tenets appear to carry within themselves.

From the end of the sixties, all the way through the eighties, cultural theory witnesses what Eagleton defines as its "golden age" (Eagleton 2003 1), an age which sees a proliferation of analyses of the contemporary status of culture in many different fields of knowledge. Butler describes the condition of the "the rise of theory" as one in which thinkers "in all sorts of fields develop[...] an excessively critical self-consciousness", one which sees the "extraordinary dominance of the works of academics over that of artists" (Butler 6, 7). As Waugh explains, "At this point, the term becomes inflected with a kaleidoscope of meanings drawn from those

human sciences variously engaged in the production of a theoretical palimpsest where the specific *aesthetic* origins of the term are almost entirely obscured” (Waugh 1992 5).

The postmodernist debate has been more and more blamed for its endless proliferation of theoretical works which try to make sense of the phenomenon in a self-referential spiral. Steven Connor, for instance, criticises the extenuating debate which evolves around postmodernism and its issues. He defines the debate as a “spiral of academic self-contemplation”, a “generative machine”, self-perpetrating in endless books, conferences, journals, and academic courses. As he points out, “It is possible to become very cynical about this, and to see the whole postmodernism craze as being kept going Scheherezade-like by long-winded academics concerned [...] to perpetuate themselves” (Connor 18, 16, 7). Randall Stevenson moves a similar charge to the postmodern debate, pointing out that “Given the range of disciplines now involved, sheer volume has inevitably added to vagueness” (Stevenson 2004 210), while Terry Eagleton describes postmodernism as “such a portmanteau phenomenon that anything you assert of one piece of it is almost bound to be untrue of another” (Eagleton 1996 viii).

If *Between*, as already seen in the second and third chapters, *anticipates* certain critical issues which Barthes and Irigaray were still to analyse at the time the novel appeared, *Thru* significantly *progresses in this line*. The novel, in fact, not only presents and embodies some of the basic theoretical concerns of the time, but also and most importantly it seems to foresee the parabola which criticism was to make during the decades to come. *Thru* seems to point out both the exhausting nature of the postmodern debate and its internal contradictions/implicit dangers. These aspects of the debate, which *Thru* seems to already indicate, have been brought to light more and more as the debate evolved, up until recently, when there has been a turning away from the *exhausting* critical discourse (even if, necessarily, by means of critical discourse itself) and a return to aestheticism, which we will better examine below.

Before going specifically into my argument, however, it needs be said that Brooke-Rose’s subsequent fictional works, from *Amalgamemnon* onwards, certainly share with *Thru* some of the critical qualities I advocate, yet it has not been my intention to expound extensively on such novels. As already explained, this choice

has been dictated by my wish to show the *parabola* that Brooke-Rose's writing accomplishes in the years of her initial approach to experimentalism, years which correspond to the early period of the "rise of theory". In other words, my dissertation aims at demonstrating how *Between* (Brooke-Rose's first fully experimental novel) anticipates some of the theories which were to acquire relevance in the years to come, while *Thru* (which reaches the *climax* of Brooke-Rose's experimentalism) points out the *contradictory aspects* of the contemporary theories. Such contradictory aspects were yet unnoticed at the time the novel was published, and took a long time to receive proper critical attention. By the eighties – when *Amalgamemnon* was published – critics and writers were much more aware of both critical theories and the internal contradictions the debate presented. For this reason, Brooke-Rose's later novels, although certainly addressing critical theories, cannot be considered as *forerunning* criticism. I have therefore chosen to focus on what I call Brooke-Rose's "critical fiction" or "fictional criticism" in the years when theory "rose" but was not yet aware of its own contradictions.

Thru is distinctive in that it was written during the "golden age" of theory and is concerned with its possible outshoots. The novel runs counter to the critique which was to occupy the decades to come, foreseeing some of the core dangers and contradictions implicit in some aspects of the postmodernist debate. The text, in fact, presents a certain dialectic which splits down into two different but convergent directions. On the one hand, *Thru* seems to indicate the danger implicit in the proliferation of theories which, coming from disparate fields of knowledge, now bear upon the production of literature. It seems to show that the rise of theory, while being undoubtedly enriching for literature, can nevertheless have the effect of drawing the attention away from the *specificity* of literary practice. On the other hand, *Thru* seems to call the attention of its readers to the fact that denying *any* notion of truth which exists "out there in the world", postmodernism runs the risk of becoming the herald of a banal and all-encompassing form of nihilism, one which denies any oppositional space outside of itself and transmutes into a form of absolutism, paradoxically reversing into what it tried to eschew in the first place.

As regards the first point made above, the multiplication of theories and the pile-up of disparate fields of knowledge which "intrude" into the sphere of literature

is treated in *Thru* with ambiguity. A critical theorist herself, Brooke-Rose is very conscious of all the theories which come to bear on the production and interpretation of a literary text, and seems to be taking them seriously in *Thru*. In fact, as already seen, the novel puts into practice Derrida's proliferation of meaning, Lacan's dialectic of desire, and Kristeva's poetic language and dialectic author/reader/character, ratifying these theorisations in its fictional tissue. On the other hand, however, Brooke-Rose never subscribes to those theories without reservation: challenging dogmatism, she critically and humorously deals with them. The "confusion" of theories *Thru* presents is subtended by a pungent humorous attitude. There is *always* a certain tongue-in-cheek approach towards all the theories which were *proliferating* at the time. *Thru* wittily targets the critical jargon on which they bred, a jargon often charged of obscurantism and which "imparted a tremendous air of difficulty and profundity" to the new "intellectual authorities" (Butler 8) who employed it. Brooke-Rose seems to hold a stance which is both humorous and critical towards those theories and their "authority", showing how both their proliferation and some of the basic points they claimed bear in them dangers and potential contradictions. The ambiguity the novel presents in regard to the theories it targets seems to suggest that the present state of things can have dangerous outcomes for the practice of literature. *Thru* demonstrates that we have come to a point when creative writing is excessively dependent on the "rise of theory", and this situation can have a bewildering effect on both writers and readers. The novel seems to suggest that an excessive self-awareness of theory can have the effect of blocking the reader's and the writer's inventiveness to the point of threatening the basic principles of creative writing and reading, namely imagination and enjoyment. The endless class discussions between teachers and students throughout the novel make clear this point: the innumerable theories which bear upon the construction of the students' written pieces have often the effect of *blocking* their imagination, rather than enhancing it. The teachers frequently refer to the bewildering effect critical theory can have on students (who represent both readers and writers). For instance, during one of the numerous class debates, Larissa declares: "I am astounded. I think it is quite aberrant, not to mention confusing [...] to be plunged into Generative Grammar in one class and Black Protest or Women's Lib in another" (T 635). Another instance

of critique of the exhausting theoretical debate of the time to be found in *Thru* is openly directed to the readers/critics of the text. The novel defines itself as “a busy competent performance before busy bees who palp oscult measure time listen see smell taste imitate suck the performer dry” (T 585). The busy bees clearly stand for the readers/critics who try to ascertain truth and meaning in the text. They are busy in trying to discover the functioning of the text, and in doing so, they “suck the performer dry”, i.e. they deprive the novel of its imaginative spirit. In fact, later on we are told that the “queen bhi” (the implied author), who executes a ballet for the bees (the readers/critics), is afraid of their “honeyvoracious impulses that palp oscult measure and imitate the message sucking the performer dry” (T 674). The implied author, in other words, is afraid that the critical interpretation of her text will reduce it to an abstract construct, without leading to the appreciation of its imaginative and creative value.

In line with poststructuralism, *Thru* plays with structuralism and undermines its claim of discovering fundamental structures which are able to explain *in toto* the rules of a narrative. By juxtaposing texts to other texts, she shows how behind each text is another text and so on *ad infinitum*: no fixed structure can explain the functioning of the text. What the text reveals are other texts behind, and in the intertextual chain it is impossible to ascertain fixed meaning: everything is variable and depends on the reader’s capacity for interpretation. Yet, Brooke-Rose also shows how *poststructuralist* theories themselves are subject to the same deconstruction they advocate. They, too, depend on interpretation and must not be taken as the unique interpretive key to the text. Opposing the danger of taking too seriously the various theories which have come to bear on the interpretation of a literary text, *all* the theories the text addresses are treated humorously and are revealed, like its characters, to be only words on the page, mere linguistic constructs. As Kermode explains, in *Thru*, “deconstruction rejoices to demonstrate that an author has really done the opposite of what she meant to do, and narratological theory can itself be deconstructed, which, in a way, is what *Thru* achieves” (Kermode 2006 17). Therefore, while writing fiction, Brooke-Rose produces literary criticism. Barthes’ death of the author, for instance, is presented in the form of a fairy tale: “once upon a time the author had supreme authority” (T 605). Similarly, Barthes’ theory of the

multiplication of voices in an open text is treated humorously as Brooke-Rose transforms it into a pseudo commandment echoing the biblical order of God to Adam and Eve: "Go forth and multiply the voices" (T 637). The text frees itself from the grip of theoretical constructs by clearly proclaiming their linguistic nature: "ideas are always words, come out of a mouthful of air, jostling each other, bursting like atoms, or hoops if you prefer, set theory gone wild, and the text slowly forms itself" (T 607). By means of the endless class discussions among the characters which revolve around the text and its supposed structure, functioning and meaning, *Thru* shows that all critical theory depends on interpretation. In a literary text, there is always something which escapes set theories. The implied author, for example – dead according to Barthes – appears and disappears throughout the text, challenging the notion of its complete absence. The mysterious figure which continually hides away and reappears from behind unsettles the critical assumption of the death of the author. By means of this figure, Brooke-Rose clearly criticises the extremist belief that behind the modern novel there exists no author and that the reader alone is the supreme interpreter of the text.

The confusion of theories of *Thru* perfectly shows how the excessively theoretical attitude towards literature can have deleterious effects upon the enjoyment of narrative. Most of the text is apparently made up of discussion *on* creative writing, rather than pieces *of* writing themselves, so as to suggest that the contemporary situation is one where the talking has actually outdone the writing. Brooke-Rose plays with the proliferation of theories to show how the aesthetic debate can become dogmatic and go *too far*, losing sight of the text. She plays with the obscurantism of its jargon to show the confusion which can arise from it. Recurrent questions on the students' part seem to put the accent on the *confusion* which arises from the many theories which they have to consider when writing or reading a text, and from the difficult jargon these theories employ. Such a jargon, as already considered, is rehandled in *Thru* in a humorous manner. Brooke-Rose's peculiar tongue-in-cheek approach towards the contemporary theories renders explicit the textual parodic critique. The way she mixes theories to let metaphorical meaning emerge transforms set theory into linguistic puns. All this relativizes the importance of theory and reaffirms the value of play for the practice of literature.

As Canepari-Labib says, “Brooke-Rose’s aesthetic attraction towards theory and her interest in beautiful systems which she can use and play against one another, is counterbalanced by her suspicion of theory and her refusal to subordinate her narrative to it” (Canepari-Labib 33). Critical theories give Brooke-Rose the possibility of creating something new out of them, but at the same time she approaches them with distance and caution. She questions their authority and their over-systematization, and explores their inconsistencies by means of her humorous stance. There is, in *Thru*, an attitude of *demystification* towards critical theory, by means of which the author also challenges the binarism serious/playful approach towards literature. Brooke-Rose seems thus to exorcise the risk of taking the contemporary theories too seriously, exposing their inherent risk of dogmatism and their limitations. What *Thru* seems to do as a part of its deconstructive approach, is to reverse the dichotomy literature/literary criticism, for the narrative produces the criticism of the theories it is made up of, and reaffirms at the same time the role and importance of literature, of the text itself. *Thru* thus foreruns basic issues which were to be at the centre of critical attention only years later, anticipating the critique which many thinkers have recently moved to postmodernism, namely the fact that it has become a “generative machine” which subsumes all experimentation in its own terms and which, generating discussions upon discussions, has become a grand narrative itself. In her essay “Whatever Happened to Narratology?”, Brooke-Rose explains that “critical and creative writing have become one and are indistinguishable [...] It is as if *phiction* and *philosophy* had changed places” (Brooke-Rose 1990 285). Initially concentrated on the study of narratological phenomena, the debate has become “an endless discussion about how to speak of them” (Brooke-Rose 1990 291). As Waugh has observed, the aesthetic debate increasingly incorporated and became dependent upon philosophical, political and social theories, with the result that nowadays its theorists “rarely discuss actual works of *art*” (Waugh 1992 7). *Thru* seems to imply that so many theories come to bear upon the practice of creative fiction, and that creative fiction becomes so much self-aware, that the risk that literary criticism runs is that of rendering the appreciation of literature more difficult, rather enhancing it. Referring to the above-quoted essay by Brooke-Rose, Kermode explains that for the author, “narratology [...] had its uses, but it also had the fatal flaw of defeating

pleasure; and pleasure, whatever the result, is always the intention” (Kermode 2006 17).

As regards the second point mentioned above, namely the nihilistic aspect of the postmodern debate, *Thru* seems to already point towards the dispute which originated around this concept and its implications. The novel in fact seems to imply that, although truth is relative, by pushing relativism too far, critical theory can tip over into a negative form of anti-foundationalism which entails nihilism as a total and debilitating denial of truth.

By the early eighties, Lyotard’s scepticism of metanarratives is so widely accepted and extended to the extreme, that the idea of the collapse of metanarratives becomes an almost universal tenet of postmodern thinking. A congeries of thinkers in different disciplines target the rationalist tradition of Western culture and its equation of knowledge to truth. The term postmodernism comes to acquire the pervasive meaning of *end of an epoch*. Specifically, it expresses a sense of the end of modernity, that modernity which begun with the Enlightenment and which heralded progressivist ideals. Deconstructionism and anti-foundationalism arise as a rejection of the notion of truth existing “out there in the world” and objectively knowable by the subject. In France, Derrida is the major exponent of deconstructionism, while Rorty inaugurates anti-foundationalism in America. The scepticism about loyalties to master narratives endorsed by Lyotard, largely supported by postmodernists, produces a pervasive cynicism about *any* claim of truth or value. The result is a feeling of suspicion towards the absolute ideals of reason, science, religion and history, and therefore towards the progressivism inaugurated by the Enlightenment: “a scepticism about the claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation” (Butler 15). The human subject, once considered to be the responsible agent and “origin” of meaning, is now considered as passively constituted by language. The world, the object of our knowledge, is no longer seen as a given entity which language can represent and/or convey, and which therefore we can objectively know. On the contrary, everything – including ourselves – is constructed and constituted by and through language. Like the language we speak, we are caught up in its chain of signifying references. Arriving at *meaning itself* is impossible, for everything depends only on interpretation. Any claim of fixed truth, knowledge and value, must

be therefore given up, along with the idea of language as capable of representing reality.

These crucial assumptions could be responded to in different, opposite ways. On the one hand, the collapse of all grounds of knowledge, and the absence of something which could replace those grounds, can generate a negative view of postmodernism as an era of bleak despair, one in which we have completely lost our power of self-determination. What follows is a view of the postmodern as “a fall from the oppositional autonomy of Romanticism and Modernism into the commodified complicity with mass culture which is the most obvious sign that capitalism has at last invaded all, leaving no space outside its logic of appropriation” (Waugh 1992 8). On the other hand, the deconstruction of previous illusions and the endless proliferation of meaning can inversely engender a strong feeling of new freedom and open up new possibilities for the human being. The subject is seen as released from a totalising view of the world which once trapped it within its boundaries. Once humanity accepts the interpretive “openness” of “reality” and frees itself from dogmatic beliefs, it can acquire a renewed freedom of expression and interpretation. This is what Derrida’s deconstructionism and, in a more radical fashion, Rorty’s anti-foundationalism claim. This is also what Brooke-Rose – following Derrida’s theories – seems to put into practice in *Thru*.

As Waugh explains, however, “every position on Postmodernism is hedged about with its own dangers” (Waugh 1992 9), and the enthusiastic attitude towards the collapse of metanarratives described above, also carries within itself some perils. Indeed, if the claim of anti-foundationalists and deconstructionists is that “truth does not exist”, it is easy to see how this claim buys precisely into that very kind of totalising ideology it apparently discards. The total rejection of foundations and universal claims of truth does not seem to be different from the metanarratives it wishes to rebuff. As Waugh suggests, postmodernism seems to have become a grand narrative itself, a virus which infects all fields of enquiry with scepticism towards the assertion of *any* truth: “Postmodernism is itself, in this respect, another Grand Narrative, but one about the end of Grand Narratives. It is impossibly tied up with performative contradictions” (Waugh 1992 12). While subsuming everything in its

own terms, postmodernism leaves the subject no space for ordering beliefs and/or values,

if neither history nor religion nor metaphysics can give meaning to our lives, whence shall we derive significance? If all general categories are arbitrary or imperialistic, how shall we order our beliefs and values? Are we faced only with a choice between totalitarian order and nominalist chaos? (Waugh 1997 6)

In the same line, Linda Hutcheon explains how Lyotard's assumption has in the end produced a "meta-narrative theory of postmodernism's incredulity to meta-narrative" (Hutcheon 1988 198). For Connor, postmodernism has become a self-referential activity which thrives on the multiplication of discourses about itself and simultaneously does not leave space for opposition,

What is striking is precisely the degree of consensus in postmodernist discourse that there is no longer any possibility of consensus, the authoritative announcements of the disappearance of final authority and the promotion and recirculation of a total and comprehensive narrative of a cultural condition in which totality is no longer thinkable. (Connor 9)

Christopher Norris, in *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (1990), remarks that the theoretical debate on postmodernism has reached a point which admits no counter-argument to itself. Theory, he explains, "has effectively turned against itself, generating a form of extreme epistemological scepticism which reduces everything – philosophy, politics, criticism and 'theory' alike – to a dead level of suasive or rhetorical effect" (Norris 4). In the same way, for Zygmunt Bauman, the postmodern mind is a critique which finds it difficult to go on precisely because "it has destroyed everything it used to be critical about [...] There is nothing left to be opposed to" (Bauman viii). Bauman is highly critical of what he defines the postmodernist "state of mind", one marked "above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving *destructiveness*" (Bauman vii-viii). For him, this state of mind means to many "licence to do whatever one may fancy and advice not to take anything you or the others do too seriously" (Bauman vii). Terry Eagleton clearly criticises the postmodern phenomenon as contradictory and prey to its own contradictions, a "logical deadlock" (Eagleton 1996 6), which has produced "an invigorating and a paralysing scepticism", for it has "unseated the sovereignty of Western Man [...] by means of a full-blooded cultural relativism" (Eagleton 1996 27). Postmodernism, he explains, has left us with no better choice than the one between "a brittle pessimism [...] and an exhilarated vision of ceaseless difference, mobility, disruption" (Eagleton 1996 3-4). Similarly, Butler talks of a "crippling contradiction" which lies

in the postmodernist “hermeneutics of suspicion”, for “if anyone says that everything is ‘really’ just constituted by a deceiving image, and not by reality, how does he or she *know*? They presuppose the very distinctions they attack” (Butler 118). Postmodernist sceptics, as Butler calls them, believe that “the lack of foundations and the contingency of everything is a good thing” (Butler 119). However, he rejoins, “this condition should be resisted, and not allowed to justify a kind of ironic indifferentism” or “indifferentist relativism” (Butler 121). A similar allegation is levelled at postmodernism by Fredric Jameson. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson defines the postmodern age as one “that has forgotten how to think historically” (Jameson ix), a culture which has lost memory of its tradition and sense of history, where the “new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing” everything, leaving no “footholds for critical effectivity” (Jameson 49). Jameson criticises Lyotard’s claim of end of metanarratives as a narrative itself, “the narrative of the end of narratives”, for “the deeper logic of the postmodern [...] imperceptibly turns into its own theory and the theory of itself [...] harboring a pathology distinctively autoreferential” (Jameson xii). Postmodernism, for Jameson, has generated “a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation [...] in contemporary “theory”” (Jameson 6). Jameson is highly critical of the production of theoretical discourses which are totalizing while claiming not to be so:

the crucial feature of what we have called a theoretical aesthetic lies in its organization around this particular taboo, which excludes the philosophical proposition as such, and thereby statements about being as well as judgements of truth. The much-decried poststructural swerve away from truth judgements and categories [is] a second-degree effect of a more primary requirement of language, which is no longer to frame utterances in such a way that those categories might be appropriate.

This is clearly a demanding aesthetic indeed, one in which the theorist walks a tightrope, the slightest lapse precipitating the sentences in question into the old-fashioned (system, ontology, metaphysics) or sheer opinion. [...] My sense is that everyday garden-variety theoretical discourse pursues a task finally not very different from that of common-language philosophy [...] namely, the exclusion of error by way of the vigilant tracking of ideological illusions [...] Language can, in other words, no longer be true; but it can certainly be false; and the mission of theoretical discourse thus becomes a kind of search-and-destroy operation in which linguistic misconceptions are remorselessly identified and stigmatized, in the hopes that a theoretical discourse negative and critical enough will not itself become the target of such linguistic demystification in its turn. The hope is, of course, vain, insofar as, like it or not, every negative statement, every purely critical operation, can nonetheless generate the ideological illusion or mirage of a position, a system, a set of positive values in its own right.

This illusion is ultimately the object of the theoretical critique (which thus becomes a *bellum omnium contra omnes*). (Jameson 392-3)

For Jameson, the “desperately repetitive situation” (Jameson 393) engendered by the endless debate of postmodernist theory is clearly not culturally beneficial.

The list of accusations which have been levelled at postmodern concepts is long and contains charges of different kinds. My argument of a countertendential standpoint in Brooke-Rose’s writing refers in particular to the accusation of nihilism which has often been levelled to postmodernism. Indeed, for its declared war against *any* kind of truth or set value, postmodernism as a mode of thought has often been charged of being a nihilistic cultural phenomenon. Anti-foundationalism has been seen, in its most radicalized expression, as inducing only relativism and bleak despair, for without foundations, there is no criteria for knowledge claims and values. In “Game with Vestiges”, Baudrillard explains how postmodernism has become a process of “proliferation and relativization of everything” (Baudrillard 1993 92), which has led to its own delegitimization. In its absolute relativization, everything which previously constituted an oppositional point has vanished, leaving only anguish and the impossibility of critical judgement,

There is no longer anything to destroy [...] for the last twenty years one has joyfully destroyed everything [...] Negativity is no longer possible precisely because there is no longer any positivity. So one has departed from the dialectic already. I find it a weightless universe where one is forced to operate without really having an adversary [...] This is a fairly dramatic situation. There is a specific anguish in it. (Baudrillard 1993 93)

In Baudrillard’s view, postmodernism has, in its wish to deconstruct, deconstructed itself. It has destroyed itself, leaving us with an emptiness against which we can only try to “find once again a moral, an intellectual virtue” in order to continue living (Baudrillard 1993 94). For Baudrillard, the culture in which we live is essentially unreal: we live as if trapped within a world of signs generated by capitalism, a world in which we mistake simulacra for real things. Postmodernity, in its relentless process of destruction of meaning, has emptied the dialectical stage of meaning: “the critical stage is empty. There is no more stage. There is no therapy of meaning or therapy through meaning”. What we are left with is only a “generalized process of indifferentiation” where “theories float” and bring about a “surplus of meaning” which generates impasse (Baudrillard 1994 161). Similarly, David Michael Levin sees in the postmodern collapse of the paradigms of knowledge, reason, truth and reality, “the spread of a latent culture of nihilism, cancer of the spirit, contagion of despair” (Levin 4). In order to recover from this situation, he advocates a clear

distinction between the *deconstruction* and the *destruction* of metaphysics: “Metaphysics can be deconstructed, but not completely destroyed” (Levin 6), for destroying the ontological tradition altogether would mean abandoning the question of Being, of the dimensionality of the human being.

Many other commentators have discarded the postmodernist mind-set as an altogether nihilistic one,²² while others have defended its form of nihilism as the only and positive attitude to be held towards our culture and society. For instance, contrarily to the views considered above, for Adorno,

The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positives, the ones who are thus conspiring with all extant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honours itself by defending what is damned as nihilism. (Adorno 381)

Adorno sees positivism as nihilistic, as it perpetuates the naive repetition of the emptiness of a belief in the world as progressive and meaningful. He believes that “Acts of overcoming [...] are always worse than what they overcome” (Adorno 380). Similarly, the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, defends the critique of humanism and the nihilistic stance of postmodernism as positive phenomena for our culture, considering them “not merely as symptoms and declarations of decadence” (Vattimo 1991 1). Vattimo believes that postmodernists should affirm and embrace nihilism, rather than accusing it, for the wish to overcome it would necessarily imply the conception of history as progress and therefore as foundation. For him, the category of overcoming is inextricably linked to and dependent upon the idea of progressivism: “any call for an ‘overcoming’ would involve remaining captive to the logic of development inscribed in the tradition of European thought” (Vattimo 1991 2). For Vattimo, therefore, only a radical acceptance of nihilism can bring about renewal in our society.

The dispute between those who believe that postmodernism entails a negative, nihilistic attitude, those who reject the charge of nihilism, and those who advocate a positive consideration of nihilism is long and often contradictory. My aim will be less to discard postmodernism and postmodernist thinking as an altogether negative or nihilistic mode of thought, than to emphasise the way Brooke-Rose’s *Thru* already

²² For other examples of the view that postmodernism is a nihilistic and negative mode of thought see in particular Mills 1959, Bell 1976, and Rose 1984.

points to a dispute which was to develop many years after the initial theoretical “boom” of the sixties and seventies.

Before going deeper into my argument, however, it is necessary to clarify the notion of nihilism. Widely used during the last two centuries, the concept can be confusing as it has no set and mutually agreed definition. The term comes from the Latin *nihil*, which means “Not anything, nothing” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*). Coined in the late eighteenth century, it was widely employed by the German Idealism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and it indicated “the loss or dissolution of an independently existing world external to consciousness” (Carr 14). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche expounded much more extensively on the implications of the advent of nihilism for our culture, giving way to the understanding of the concept in the first half of the twentieth century.

In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche gives a definition of the “European nihilism” which “stands at the door” of our culture as “the radical repudiation of value, meaning and desirability” (Nietzsche 1968 5, 7). For Nietzsche, nihilism was a cultural disease resulting from the dissolution of Christianity and the ensuing crisis in European history and civilization. Nihilism was thus a consequence of the collapse of the Christian way of interpreting the world, and therefore a crisis of our interpretive ability. Yet nihilism was not, in his view, a necessarily negative and insurmountable phenomenon. For Nietzsche, “nihilism had within it the possibility of redemption from an interpretation of life that was both hypocritical and debilitating” (Carr 4). He interpreted the phenomenon as a *turning point* in our history, a point which could either lead to the ruin of our culture, or inaugurate a new, life-affirming manner of experiencing the world and ourselves. In other words, the crisis-value he attributed to nihilism was not necessarily debilitating, as he believed that the crisis could stimulate recovery from the disease which affected our society. Recovery from nihilism could engender socio-cultural renewal: “Disease, degeneration, decadence [...] can culminate in dissolution and death but can also result in increase and improvement” (Carr 28). For Nietzsche, nihilism should not engender scepticism or disengagement from the problems of society: “He asked not that we stop interpreting [...] but only that we recognize any particular interpretive act for what it is, namely, an interpretation” (Carr 31). In Nietzsche’s view, nihilism, taken as “absolute

valuelessness” (qtd. in Carr 38), was extremely dangerous, because it is interpretation and the will to truth (the will to interpret and understand) which enable us to survive: “The attribution of meaning enables us to endure life [...] To will no longer, to suffer existence merely passively without offering some sort of interpretation, explanation, or justification, signifies the ultimate degeneration of an organism” (Carr 38). As Carr reinstates,

Despite its necessity, Nietzsche found “the inference that there is no meaning at all” to be a “tremendous generalization” that was “pathological” in being so extreme [...] While he acknowledged that “the world is not worth what we believed,” he suggested that, far from having no meaning, “the world could be worth much more than we believed”. (Carr 42)

Nietzsche distinguished between two different possible reactions to the problem of nihilism: one passive-negative, the other active-positive. If passive nihilism “merely succumbs to the nothingness that surrounds it” (Carr 42), its active counterpart is cathartic, as it embraces completely the destruction of previous beliefs and values *only in order to recover from it and reaffirm life*,

the free spirit [...] goes through a transitional period of radical doubt and suspicion, seeking to overthrow not only the values that bred [his or her culture] but all values altogether. This massive suspicion ultimately [...] engenders a renewed appreciation for the world that had been previously devalued. (Carr 45)

After Nietzsche, in the first half of the twentieth century, the concept of nihilism was resumed by such thinkers as Heidegger, Sartre, Jünger, Jaspers and Camus. Although a thorough analysis of the different approaches to the concept would go beyond the scope of this thesis, what is important in the light of our dissertation, is to note the basic significance the concept of nihilism possessed for these thinkers. Notwithstanding the differences which exist among their systems of thought, they all shared the attempt to *embrace the condition of meaninglessness as a necessary step towards renewal*: nihilism was seen as a *possibility* for the human being to access a new and “liberating” degree of existence. Heidegger saw that recognising the non-existence of God and facing this fundamental lack was necessary for man in order to take full responsibility for his actions. Jaspers, Sartre and Camus also saw that nihilism was *not the only and final solution* to the question of being, but rather the very and necessary *precondition* for authentic human existence (Cf. Carr 85-86). In accordance with the meaning Nietzsche first gave to the concept – as a crisis which could generate cultural renewal – the goal was thus to *overturn* circumstances which seemed paralyzing (the loss of everything which is ultimately

true or meaningful) and achieve a renewed status which would affirm existence on fresh bases.

During the second half of the twentieth century, however, the problem of nihilism has been recast into a different framework, in which the significance and possibilities that Nietzsche attributed to the problem have been dangerously lost. As Karen Carr shows in her work *The Banalization of Nihilism* (1992), the concept of nihilism has undergone, during the second half of the twentieth century, a banalization of its meaning and purpose which is not culturally and socially constructive. The new attitude towards nihilism is evident in the anti-foundationalist and deconstructionist approaches to the concepts of truth and reality. Thinkers such as Rorty and Derrida attack the metaphysics of presence and the concept of truth linked to it, seeking to uncover the absolutist pretensions of the Western cultural tradition. What characterises their approach is the rejection of *all* claims of truth, value or meaning: “The dissolution of foundations – a source of anxiety (or at least concern) for the existentialists – is now seen as a source of joyous affirmation, of lighthearted playfulness, or benign indifference” (Carr 86). In other words, the loss of the nostalgia for the collapse of metanarratives described by Lyotard, now becomes a source of joy. For deconstructionists and anti-foundationalists, nihilism is not to be seen as engendering despair and negating life, but rather as joyously affirming the plurality of existence: only once the subject has given up the claim to foundations and fixed truths, can it see the value that lies in untruth. For such theorists, metanarratives can no longer explain social reality as a whole, as reality appears now fragmented into multiple, incommensurable forms. Rather than seeing nihilism as a reason for despair, these postmodernists rely upon it as the source of inspiration which can allow them to develop new and radical ideas.

Carr criticises the shift that the concept of nihilism has undergone within postmodernism as a process of domestication or banalization of the nihilistic attitude. Nihilism is no longer seen as a historical phenomenon which can and should be overcome, but as a fact which is *coextensive* with humanity. As a consequence, “nihilism ceases to be something from which we must escape, loses its potentially transformative and redemptive power, and becomes instead simply a rather banal characterization of the human situation” (Carr 7).

With the term nihilism, I will now indicate the rejection of all claims of truth, an attitude that can be summed up in the sentence “there is no truth”. In addition, it is important to distinguish nihilism from both scepticism and relativism. These approaches towards knowledge and truth, in fact, crucially differentiate from one another. While scepticism represents a dubious stand in respect to an entity, nihilism *denies* that entity. In the same way, relativism is the view that a given claim is relative to whom makes the claim, rather than a complete repudiation of that claim (nihilism).

Carr’s examination ponders on the upshots which emerge when nihilism is no longer considered as a disease of the human condition, but it comes to be seen as the inherent condition of humanity. In Carr’s view, nihilism has become a banal feature of modern life because it has lost its power to shock, and with it (as it was for Nietzsche) its power to redeem. What has been abandoned, with the postmodern turn, is the search for meaning and for the foundations of our life. If what we gain with this shift is essentially freedom of expression, what we lose is represented by “our inability to move from our language and our beliefs to something behind or beyond that serves as a legitimating ground” (Carr 88). Moreover, it is easy to see how this form of nihilism, which does not admit any counterargument, is in itself a totalizing narrative which claims to reject all totalizing narratives. The total rejection of all truth claims “paradoxically results in an absolutism at once pernicious and covert” (Carr 8). Nihilism reverses into dogmatism or dogmatic absolutism. As Carr explains,

When we fully and happily dispatch with truth, what we gain is not pluralism, not toleration, but rather the absolutization of the dominant power structures of the culture to which we belong. Nihilism, once complete, leaves us with nothing but the set of currently existing social practices and beliefs; in the absence of anything else, these practices and beliefs become, for all intents and purpose, absolute. (Carr 134)

For Carr, the mere multiplication of interpretations, without any ground which permits us to choose *between* them, can only lead to *impasse*. The logic of “everything is equally valid” furnishes no criteria whatsoever by which we can choose or privilege one practice over another. Since all knowledge claims are subjective, the result is “a subjectivistic leveling of knowledge into mere opinion” which destroys “any possible leverage for criticism” (Carr 136, 137).

Many other commentators have criticised postmodernist anti-foundational claims in ways which bear similarities to Carr's analysis. For Thomas McCarthy, for instance, Rorty's theory engenders the attitude of "there is nothing left that really makes a difference [...] everything is permitted" (McCarthy 361). In McCarthy's eyes, a more helpful response to the loss of absolute truth would be "to develop concepts of reason, truth, and justice that, while no longer pretending to a God's-eye point of view, retain something of their transcendent, regulative, critical force" (McCarthy 367). Likewise, Richard Bernstein, in his essay "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward", explains that in reality Rorty's theory supports the status quo and "diverts us from the pragmatically important issues that need to be confronted" (Bernstein 546). Both McCarthy and Bernstein argue that anti-foundationalism has the effect of eventually reinforcing the dominant practices of our culture, leaving no space for critical and constructive analysis, no ground for a critical evaluation of such practices. In the same vein, Butler criticises the postmodernist scepticism about truth as devoid "of a proper concern for the activities of reason-giving and rational negotiation" (Butler 115). Similarly, Bauman talks of a "postmodern ethical paradox". For him, while choice and responsibility have been restored to each and every single subject, we cannot win acceptance for our moral convictions without falling prey to the "already discredited bid for domination" (Bauman xxiii).

It is however necessary to compare the extremist position represented by Rorty to Derrida's deconstructive theory. In light of these considerations, we will be able to better understand the approach Brooke-Rose seems to adopt towards the (potentially negatively nihilistic) deconstruction of truth. Carr specifically concentrates her analysis on Rorty's work, referring to Derrida's theorizations and to the differences between anti-foundationalism and deconstructionism. Notwithstanding the due dissimilarities between these two critical approaches, however, I find Carr's account particularly useful in that it reveals a danger which is also implicit in the French deconstructionism, namely the danger of "domesticating" nihilism, which Brooke-Rose seems already to point out in *Thru*. Rorty's theory may be seen as an extremization of the deconstruction which Derrida heralded. It thus shows *what can happen* if we go to the limits of deconstruction, or if we misunderstand Derrida's

claim of multiplicity of meaning. This will serve my purpose of illustrating how Brooke-Rose's *Thru* already seems to foresee the danger of such an extremization.

In "From Logic to Language to Play", Rorty explains that there is no absolute truth which can be taken as a ground for our actions, that "nothing grounds our practices, nothing legitimizes them, nothing shows them to be in touch with the way things really are" (Rorty 753). Rorty thus sees nihilism as endemic to the human condition, not as something which can and/or should be changed or overcome. For anti-foundationalists, the loss of truth and the multiplicity of interpretations becomes an occasion for joyous affirmation.

For Derrida, as already extensively considered in the course of this dissertation, we can have no access to the transcendental signifier. Since signs refer to other signs *ad infinitum*, there is no possibility to break out of this infinite chain. Derrida thus shows how truth itself is always relative to the peculiar standpoint adopted and that the relationship of language to reality is not given. The linguistic system is a cultural construct which does not relate to external reality with a simple equation of signifier and signified. The subject, far from knowing reality "for what it really is", remains unavoidably caught within the chain of referentiality which constitutes language. Derrida thus advocates the abandonment of all truth claims, with the aim of destroying the metaphysical illusions of our culture. However, the fact that he sets out a goal for his enterprise (namely the destruction, or overcoming of the metaphysics of presence), makes us realise that, for him, nihilism is not *an end in itself*, but a means for overcoming the present view of things. As Carr makes clear, Derrida "links his enterprise explicitly to transformation: 'an internal critique or deconstruction' is an 'essential part' of any culture's development" (Carr 99). Taking up this point, Rorty criticises Derrida as being still trapped within the illusion of foundationalism, for he sees metaphysics as something that must be overcome and deems deconstruction as a necessary element for cultural transformation (Cf. Carr 101). In my view, Derrida's thought represents a positive solution to the problem of nihilism. He does not advocate that "there is no truth", but rather that there is no "ultimate truth", as truth continually slips away in the system of references which constitutes language. He posits play as the basis of a possible new way of dealing with life and the absence it entails. If for Rorty, Derrida is still caught in a

foundationalist framework, in my view he represents a balance between the two absolutist extremes (which are, in the end, one and the same) of a total nihilism and a total dogmatism.

For Derrida, we have to abandon the idea of the origin of meaning as transcendental signifier in favour of the practice of play, the play of representation, and of its infinite interpretive possibilities,

There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without *nostalgia* [...] On the contrary, we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance. (Derrida 1982a 27)

Derrida's reference to Nietzsche is revealing in light of our thesis: he mentions affirmation, play, and laughter, as values which can positively *overcome* the question of nihilism. Derrida does not claim that "there is no truth", but rather that truth lies as a trace which is both present and absent in the play of language. However, it is easy to move from Derrida's deconstructionism to a complete denial of all truth claims. The border between deconstructionism and anti-foundationalism is very thin. The danger is that of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, that of forgetting, in other words, Nietzsche's lesson, namely that nihilism should be seen as a state of crisis and a *temporary* phenomenon which must be overcome. For Nietzsche, in fact, "either we give birth to new ways of valuing, new forms of believing, or we perish" (Carr 137). Contrarily to Nietzsche's view, the anti-foundationalist acceptance of nihilism as "simply the way life goes" appears to rule out any possibility of transformation.

Brooke-Rose, as we have already seen in the course of our analysis, takes up Derrida's theory and puts it into practice. When I say that she puts it into practice, I do not mean that she merely *presents* Derrida's theory in her novel, but rather that, while presenting it, she *plays with* it. It must not be forgotten that there is *always* a certain tongue-in-cheek attitude on Brooke-Rose's part. In *Thru*, by means of this ambiguously humorous attitude, the author seems to be taking a double shot. On the one hand, she puts play into practice as theorised by Derrida. She overtly sets in motion the infinite deferral of signifiers, showing how "truth is never apparent", but always caught up in the play of language: meaning does depend on interpretation. On the other hand, *Thru* seems to draw the attention of the reader on the fact that saying that "meaning depends on interpretation" does *not* amount to saying that *there is no meaning and no truth* whatsoever. Truth is relative, but we do not have to go *too far*

in the relativization of truth, penalty the fall into the absolute void of “there is no truth”. The danger, in other words, is that of falling prey to a banalizing form of nihilism which, as *Thru* seems to suggest, would subsume everything in its own terms and result necessarily debilitating for the practice of literature. The ironical stand of *Thru* towards the myriad of contemporary theories, in fact, appears to be primarily directed against the “anything goes” approach which seemed to peep from the window of literary practice as a consequence of the endless proliferation of meaning and interpretive possibilities strongly advocated by those theories. This is, for instance, my reading of the criticism to the notion of death of the author in *Thru*. However carried out with humour, the (serious) message that going *too far* would leave us with no ground or basis for the assessment of our practice is evident in such passages as the dialogue between the teacher and one of the students about the inversion of author’s and reader’s fallacies,

But what about the clarity of the message?

You read what you want into it.

I see. And what do you read?

It’s not for me to say, I wrote it.

But the reader is the writer and the writer is the reader. (T 608)

If everything depends only on the reader’s interpretation, what is left to the author? What is his/her ground of action? Does he/she not have any role in the text? The danger implicit in the postmodern debate is that the proliferation and relativization of values which it advocates, if interpreted in a radical way, leaves no criteria of value whatsoever for the assessment of human practices. If there is no longer *any* truth, if everything depends on interpretation, on which ground can we choose one thing rather than another? Deconstructionism risks becoming a logic which does not allow any other logic outside of itself.

At the same time, as demonstrated above, the text directs a slightly different kind of critique towards the theories it tackles. The endless class discussions during which the students argue about their different or opposite interpretations and opinions, demonstrate that critical theories are themselves subject to interpretation, and that they do not have to be accepted unquestioningly.

Another danger of absolutism implicit in the postmodernist theories which *Thru* points out is linked to the anti-representational quality of language, i.e. to the impossibility of representation these theories advocate. With the poststructuralist

debate, language is no longer considered able to represent reality. Contrarily to this view, *Thru*, as already seen, reinstates the idea of literature as “mirror” of life, even if the “reality” reflected is ontologically unstable. The novel does not deny representation: literature, and the language which constitutes it, are *necessarily* representational, even if our notion of representation has changed. As one of her characters in *Thru* says, “Language is all we have to apprehend reality, if we must use that term” (T 642). For Brooke-Rose, language is still representational, even if what it represents is an unstable reality. We cannot do away with representation in fiction without running the risk of stripping fiction of its vital attribute, that of being a “mirror” of life, even in the very face of life’s ontological instability.

In this way, Brooke-Rose seems to anticipate another facet of the debate which was still to come at the time *Thru* was published. The novel suggests that, while providing postmodernist writers with much more freedom than realists had ever had, the absolute loss of confidence in the grand narratives of reason, science, god and history presents a basic danger, which is inextricably linked to the question of language and its ability to represent the world. The danger implicit in all this is that of negating representation altogether. As Jacques Rancière argued, Lyotard’s anti-representational art of the postmodern is necessarily still representational. In other words, if once the world was representable and required representational forms, it is now unrepresentable and therefore requires anti-representational forms, but there is still a logic of appropriateness and correspondence (i.e. of representation) underpinning Lyotard’s anti-representational claim (Cf. Rancière 109-142).

In the essay “Post-Postmodern Discontent”, Robert L. McLaughlin talks of an “aesthetic sea change” evident in many fiction writers since the late eighties. These writers, he explains, have been attempting to respond “to the perceived dead end of postmodernism, a dead end that has been reached because of postmodernism’s detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language” (McLaughlin 55). However, he explains, the reason why postmodernism has been perceived as a dead end lies in the fact that its main tenets have been often misread. Indeed, Barth’s famous essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) was generally misunderstood at the time it appeared, and despite the fact that he wrote other two essays to clarify his point, his basic claim is still largely misunderstood. A

typical example of this misunderstanding, continues McLaughlin, is represented by Marshall Boswell, who reads Barth's essay as one which "cut the cord between the text and the world, smashed the mirror art traditionally held up to nature, turned the referential function of literature in on itself" (McLaughlin 56). Misreading Barth's essay, Boswell thinks that,

the task of the *post*-modernist writer was not to develop additional new methods of rendering the act of perception but rather to examine the relationship between literary method and the reality it sought to depict [...] the postmodern novel would employ literary conventions ironically, in the form of parody, thereby undertaking a self-reflexive inquiry into the ontological status of literary inquiry itself. (Boswell, qtd. in McLaughlin 56).

In other words, in Boswell's view, postmodernism deals with the process of representation, not with the object represented. Barth's claims has been interpreted as embodying a total rejection of reality, and therefore as ungrounding certainties and engendering a sense of endless possibilities and anxiety. The text has been seen as "grounded in nothing beyond itself" (Boswell, qtd. in McLaughlin 56), made up of a language which replaces reality rather than representing it. As McLaughlin clarifies, "Barth is certainly making problematic literature's referential relationship to the world, making the process of representation opaque rather than transparent [...] but he is not severing the connection altogether" (McLaughlin 57).

In the essay "Postmodernism Revisited", Barth further clarifies his ideas, specifically quoting Umberto Eco's *Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable*,

the postmodern attitude [is] that of a man who loves a very sophisticated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this [...] both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony....But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (Eco, qtd. in Barth 1988 22)

Barth continues: "If for 'Barbara Cartland' we substitute 'the history of literature up to the day before yesterday,' it is the very point of my essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion'" (Barth 1988 22). Barth is *not* suggesting that literature stopped referring to the world, that art stopped being referential, but rather that we reconsider the problematic relationship between language and its referents. As McLaughlin puts it,

Barth, then, is suggesting neither a dead end for language and literature nor a severing of the referential relationship between language and literature and the world. Rather, the used-upness he talks about is akin to the loss of innocence of language or representation's loss of transparency. In the

postmodern era language and literature make their own status as representation part of what they're about, but only part: the other part is about our "still-human hearts and conditions". (McLaughlin 58)

The much accused self-referentiality of postmodernism has been misunderstood as a total denial of language's (and therefore of literature's) connection to the world. However, McLaughlin reinstates,

postmodernism was never about self-referentiality by itself: postmodernism made the process of representation problematic, it foregrounded literature pointing to itself trying to point to the world, but it did not give up the attempt to point to the world [...] language, narrative, and the processes of representation are the only means we have to experience and know the world, ourselves, and our possibilities for being human. (McLaughlin 66-67)

What I read in Brooke-Rose's *Thru* is not abandonment of literature's referential quality, but on the contrary an attempt to *reinstate* the referentiality of language and literature in the face of a debate which runs the risk of going too far in its assumptions and of negating representation. Negating representation would mean negating the function and value of literature and therefore "killing" literature. This is, in my reading, the meaning of *Thru*'s "self-evident defence-mechanism against threat of extermination" (T 637). The threat of extermination which the text faces derives from the possibility of a total negation of its referential function.

Thru represents, in my view, a countertendency to the decried impossibility of representation of much postmodernist fiction. Language's inability to represent reality, already considered in relation to Beckett, is a tenet shared by many postmodernist writers. It is embodied, for instance, by the heroine of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. Anna tries in vain to find words which would express her condition and feelings, but inevitably surrenders to the impossibility of representation,

Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want [...] The fact is, the real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisk, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind [...] Anything at all, but not words. The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and the others won't. (Lessing 549)

In a similar way, in *Albert Angelo*, B. S. Johnson interrupts the narration to deprecate, "Fuck all this lying" (Johnson 165), thus proclaiming his "disgust with the inescapability of the condition of fictionality" (Waugh 1995 38). Brooke-Rose, in my view, reinstates the referential value of language, reaffirming its role and importance. Although she demonstrates the linguistic nature of critical theories, and therefore the relativity of their meaning, she does not advocate language's inability to express the

world. Brooke-Rose's search for new representational means is not a dismissal of the realist narrative because language is no longer able to express reality. In Brooke-Rose's view, it is rather *the way we use language* which is no longer able to express the new reality of the world around. However, contrarily to much postmodernist fiction, Brooke-Rose's novels investigate new representational devices in order to *continue reflecting the world*, even if within an altogether different cognitive frame from that of realistic fiction.

Intimately tied up to the question of language's referentiality, is the self-referentiality which has become a widespread characteristic of postmodernist fiction. Brooke-Rose's *Thru*, as already seen, endorses Derrida's claim that "there is no 'outside' to the text" , "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida 1976 158). In my view, *Thru* crucially enters the debate around the concept of text, for it seems to clarify the significance and implications of Derrida's claim, which has been very often misunderstood (as is the case with Barth's essay). In my reading, in fact, Derrida is not endorsing the thesis that reality and truth do not exist, and therefore that "nothing could count as an effective critique of past or present ideologies and systems of representation" (Norris 38). As Norris elucidates, Derrida is pointing to the fact that texts always "come up against the ineluctable limits of their own ideological project" (Norris 38). Brooke-Rose goes beyond the mere self-referentiality of the narrative text, showing how "everything is text", not in the sense that the literary text is all there is because reality does not exist, but in the sense that *reality as a whole* is a text, and this reality is reflected in and by the literary text. By doing so, she reinstates, once more the importance of literature as a mirror of life.

A further danger implicit in the postmodern debate which *Thru* seems to point out is the emergence of what McHale defines the "anxiety of metanarratives". As he explains, the wide acceptance of Lyotard's collapse of metanarratives, has generated as a counter-reaction a widespread anxiety: "Lyotard's description has been turned into a prescription: avoid at all costs the appearance of endorsing metanarratives [...] or, more briefly: avoid stories, don't narrate". This situation has provoked "a paralyzing anxiety *not be seen to narrate*" (McHale 1992 5, 6), i.e. not to be seen to rely on narratives. It is this anxiety which Brooke-Rose positively subverts, showing how narration is life, how the life of literature necessarily depends on narration

("narration is life and I am Scheherezade"). The anxiety not to be seen to narrate represents a danger for literature: since any narrative might be accused of naïve reliance on metanarratives, the risk is that of stopping narrating altogether. Brooke-Rose seems to foresee this risk and sets out to defend the act of narrating. As already observed, in fact, the metadiegetic levels of *Thru*, its stories within stories, are not important because they fulfil a specific narrative function (explanation, contrast, analogy or distraction), but rather because they are a way of bringing forth the narration. What is given the utmost importance is the act of narrating itself. This is also revealed by Larissa referring to the stories she invents by declaring, "I know, it's a flop. As this one, and the next, redundant but necessary for qualcosa to continue. Narration is life and I am Scheherezade" (T 711). As for Scheherezade, narrating in *Thru* becomes a way of escaping death: the only thing which matters is to continue inventing stories in a way that keeps the reader's pleasure and curiosity alive, for to stop narrating would inevitably lead to death for literature. In this way, Brooke-Rose's work recasts the importance of the narrative act *per se*: narration is what matters, narration is life.

From what has been considered above, it should be clear that *Thru* seems to amazingly forerun the debate which developed around the danger of absolutism implicit in postmodernist theories. While claiming the rejection of absolutism, such theories carried in themselves the danger of accepting the relativism of meaning in a banalizing (and therefore nihilistic) way, and the danger of negating representation and narration altogether.

Thru offers its readers a rich sense of the contemporary critical panorama, simultaneously pointing to the jeopardy of its theories. Brooke-Rose plays with critical theories and shows that they are *themselves subject to interpretation* and that they should not be accepted unquestioningly. Not to question these theories would mean to fall prey to a totalizing view. While the overcoming of nihilism is not to be understood as the replacement of totalizing truths with others, interpretation and will to truth are essential for human survival, in the same way as narration is essential for the survival of literature. Brooke-Rose seems to imply that crisis thinking should not be banalized and, above all, if crisis it is, it is important that we find an alternative, or an exit, to it, and not that we accept the loss of any ground for the assessment of our

practices with a happy smile. If the deconstruction of fixed notions of meaning is a positive and liberating possibility for our human condition, we cannot stop at the mere destruction of all claims of truth, we must – after destruction – construct something new in order to go on. The claim just made is evident in *Thru*, for the text refers many times to the revolution it engenders, but it also explicitly makes clear that “destruction precedes construction” (T 602), thus positing the possibility and *necessity* of a valid alternative to the old beliefs and values. If Bauman criticises postmodern thought as having “done next to nothing to support its defiance of past pretence with a new practical antidote for old poison” (Bauman xvii-xviii), we see how Brooke-Rose actually furnishes an antidote to the crisis generated by the collapse of metanarratives. If Butler declares that “Postmodernists are by and large pessimists [...] and the beliefs and the art they inspire are often negative rather than constructive”, and that “postmodernists are good critical deconstructors, and terrible constructors” (Butler 114, 116), Brooke-Rose’s novel refutes this accusation. What I read in *Thru* is not the mere destruction of old beliefs (and narrative techniques), but a construction of a new text: a new solution emerges out of the old intertextual chain, as already extensively considered in the course of this dissertation.

Jon R. Snyder explains that the dismantling of the positivist and historicist culture deconstructs all metaphysical truth claims without posing new truths that could fill in the void left by the old ones: “there is no exit, for twentieth-century humanity, from a world of contrasting and often conflicting interpretations” (in Vattimo 1991 xiii). In light of Snyder’s claim that “there is no exit” from the situation postmodernism has engendered, the end of Brooke-Rose’s novel acquires salient connotations: that “exit through the text” we have already considered, posits itself as an exit from the debate and into the text itself, a text which engenders revolution not for the mere sake of destruction, but in order to bring renewal in the practice of writing (as we have seen, *Thru* brings renewal in the relationship between author/reader/character, it brings renewal in language with its endless proliferation of meaning and poetic language).

As Carr explains, the anxiety about the loss of fundamentals has not been dissolved or even assuaged by anti-foundationalists. It has merely been set aside, as the product of a false and illusory quest (Cf. Carr 136-138). Brooke-Rose, instead,

resolves this anxiety, i.e. *overcomes* nihilism into an affirmation of the fictional play itself, reinstating its importance and vitality in the face of theories which threaten to “kill” the text with too much theoretical thinking. The exit *Thru* furnishes is therefore an exit from the *radical relativism* (which tips over into nihilism) of postmodernist theory, an exit through the very text. The *practice* of the text is posited as the exit from the all-surrounding debate which carries serious dangers for the practice of literature. *Thru* therefore represents a liberatory mode as opposed to more pessimistic forms of postmodernism, those which employ self-referentiality in order to deny any reality outside of the text, in order to negate representation. *Thru* also represents a step forward in respect to the mere proliferation of meaning which can generate the “anything goes mentality”, showing how there is always meaning in the “text of reality”, even if this meaning is no longer knowable once and for all, but it is rather a trace, both absent and present at the same time.

Moreover, by focusing the attention of the reader on both the multiplication of theories and its often obscure critical jargon, by repeatedly putting the accent on the importance of the act of narrating *per se*, and by offering an exit from the debate and a passageway *into the text* itself, *Thru* anticipates the recent critical debate which advocates a return to aestheticism. The ideas of the New Aestheticism have been brought forward by such thinkers as Thomas Docherty, Jonathan Dollimore and Jay Bernstein, to name but a few. In their edited volume *The New Aestheticism* (2003), John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas argue that the success of literary theory has, on the one hand, rightly challenged the humanist notion of art, i.e. the “assumption of art’s intrinsic spiritual value” (Joughin and Malpas 1) and its universality. On the other hand, however, what has been lost in this process, is the “sense of art’s specificity as an object of analysis [...] its specificity as an aesthetic phenomenon” (Joughin and Malpas 1). In other words, in the rush to challenge the aesthetic independence of a work, the rise of critical theory has more and more analysed a literary text solely in relation to the historical, political and cultural contexts of art’s production, losing in this way the specificity of any given work of art. The singularity of the aesthetic has thus been effaced: “Theoretical criticism is in continual danger [...] of throwing out the aesthetic baby with the humanist bathwater” (Joughin and Malpas 1).

While it is important to avoid the reductive approach of an old-style aestheticism, it is also important, for the New Aestheticism, to understand that art cannot be explained solely in light of critical theories (cultural and political ideologies, class, race and gender issues, or theories of textuality and subjectivity),

Art is inextricably tied to the politics of contemporary culture, and has been throughout modernity. Aesthetic specificity is not, however, entirely explicable, or graspable, in terms of another conceptual scheme or genre of discourse. the singularity of the work's 'art-ness' escapes and all that often remains is the critical discourse itself, reassured of its methodological approach and able to reassert its foundational principles. (Joughin and Malpas 3)

The New Aestheticism seems thus to imply that while postmodernist theory has shown that universal human values have no foundation, analysing art only in relation to ideology and set theoretical constructs makes us lose the sense of art's specificity, for there is more than ideology in art,

the most basic tenet that we are trying to argue for is the equiprimordiality of the aesthetic – that, although it is without doubt tied up with the political, historical, ideological, etc., thinking it as other than determined by them, and therefore reducible to them, opens a space for an artistic or literary specificity that can radically transform its critical potential and position with regard to contemporary culture. (Joughin and Malpas 3)

This does not imply a return to aestheticism as a “universally and apolitically humanist activity” (Joughin and Malpas 3), as a realm completely independent from theory. What the New Aestheticism argues for is not that we should stop analysing the text in relation to different cultural aspects or critical theories, but rather that we should also reconsider the value of art's specificity as something which goes beyond theory. A “post-theoretical” or more reflective approach to theory is thus postulated by the New Aestheticism, one which would “reassert the importance of aesthetics to contemporary theory and criticism” (Joughin and Malpas 4).

As Waugh explains, Schiller was one of the first thinkers to put forward the importance of the aesthetic “as the redemptive hope for an age of increasingly instrumental rationality [...] he recommended the idea of the aesthetic as a disinterested realm of play and semblance [...] an autonomously existing state which could release us from the constraints imposed by utilitarian pressures” (Waugh 1992 14). For Schiller, art is the means to attain a reconciliation with the world. For him, the “reintegration into a lost harmonious world” can only be effected “through a self-conscious and strenuous *aesthetic* attempt to reintegrate thought and feeling into a state of equilibrium at a higher level in aesthetic activity” (Waugh 1992 14). This idea is obviously also evident in postmodernism, and specifically “in those currents

of Postmodernism which view the aesthetic in terms of self-conscious activity” (Waugh 1992 14). In fact, according to Patricia Waugh, postmodernism is not only concerned with the fragmentariness of existence and the impossibility of reconciliation, but it is also as much concerned “with reconciliation and reintegration” of “thought and feeling” (Waugh 1992 14). For postmodernism, as it was for Romanticism, the main vehicle for this reconciliation is seen in the aesthetic. However, there are basic differences between the two currents in their approach to the aesthetic. What distinguishes postmodernism from Romanticism is that in the former the aesthetic has “invaded the spheres of science and philosophy” (Waugh 1992 14). In postmodernism, “the aesthetic is no longer simply model or catalyst occupying an autonomous realm of its own. It has entered the lifeworld and invaded the spheres of knowledge and ethics in a new version of a longstanding attempt fully to integrate body with mind and self with world” (Waugh 1992 14-15). Romanticism and postmodernism share the sense of crisis as related to the failure of the Enlightenment reason, and “in both the aesthetic becomes the only possible means of redemption” (Waugh 1992 15). However, the meaning and valence of the concept of the aesthetic shift within postmodernism. The Schillerean or Romantic influence is assimilated into postmodernism, as Patricia Waugh sees, but the redeeming power of the aesthetic in postmodernism is different from its Romantic version. It is on the one hand stronger for it is considered as inseparable from reality: truth is fiction and *vice versa*. It becomes on the other hand weaker because the lack of metaphysical foundations of reality subtracts from the aesthetic the possibility to be considered as the expression of any fixed foundation of the world (Cf. Waugh 1992 15). The Romantic or Schillerean idea of the aesthetic is thus different from the postmodern sublime or absolute. Postmodernist aesthetic is weaker because art is no longer considered representative of the world, given the claim of the impossibility of representation made by Lyotard and other postmodernist thinkers.

The New Aestheticism is evaluative rather than relativized. It searches for the specificity and singularity of the work of art. It aims at recovering the romantic, redemptive notion of art, whereas postmodernist aesthetics are easily collapsed into the relativism of consumer society where everything is interchangeable. The New Aestheticism puts the accent on the *redemptive* aspect of art, on the idea that art

makes us better, improves us, gives us an aesthetic education, and teaches us to *feel* the world in opposition to the rationalist approach to reality which has collapsed on itself. It therefore crucially reasserts art's *oppositional power* to the consumer society. The New Aestheticism tends to view postmodernism as yet another theory that takes us away from the singularity of literature, from the specifics of aesthetic forms. It reasserts the aesthetic in a different way and to different ends than postmodernism. It seeks to reaffirm the so-called "singularity" of literature, i.e. the fact that it is formally specific and *irreducible* to political positions, sociological abstractions, and ideological fixities. The New Aestheticism is thus an example of criticism turning away from theories that were in force for decades. There is a romantic strain to postmodernist thinking, yet the romantic legacy takes a different form in the New Aestheticism for its circumspection about theory and its need to reassert *literature as literature*.

Brooke-Rose seems to recuperate the redemptive prospects of the aesthetic in a positive way. As already seen, *Thru* deconstructs, in line with Derrida, the concept of fixed and absolute meaning, but it also reinstates, with a parallel move, the representative value of language. Language is still representational, even if the nature of its referents is ontologically unstable. In this way, Brooke-Rose seems to upturn the claim made above by Waugh (a claim to which I subscribe in the case of other postmodernist fiction, that fiction which denies any possibility of representing reality), namely the claim that the aesthetic in postmodernism becomes weaker because the lack of metaphysical foundations of reality subtracts from the aesthetic the possibility to be considered as the expression of any fixed foundation of the world (Cf. Waugh 1992 15). In fact, by reinstating the representative role of language (although not the foundations of reality), Brooke-Rose also reinstates the possibility of art as representing our present condition, and therefore eliminates the "weaker" aspect of the postmodern aesthetic.

On the other hand, by means of the critique directed towards the many theories which have come to bear on the interpretation of a text, *Thru* seems to reinstate the autonomy of the aesthetic realm. It reasserts the idea that the aesthetic occupies an autonomous territory of its own. The aesthetic of postmodernism, initially pertaining to the field of art, has "at last invaded all". Art's specificity has been lost because of

the endless proliferation of theories in all fields of knowledge. Brooke-Rose clearly opposes this situation by focusing on the impossibility to explain a narrative text solely by means of theories. There is always something which escapes theory and interpretation in *Thru*. In this way, the author reaffirms art's specificity and the impossibility to view it solely in light of theoretical constructs. Brooke-Rose's accent on playfulness, in particular, can be read as an attempt to reinstate the redeeming power of the aesthetic. Play offers a way out of the debilitating debate: creativity remains the most important thing. In the face of theories which advocate an absolute lack of foundations, and which can therefore easily induce us to despair, Brooke-Rose puts forward the idea of the aesthetic as capable of offering the subject reconciliation with the world. Even more, play becomes a cognitive activity, for it is through play that Brooke-Rose's novels postulate their relationship with reality: play becomes a way of approaching and understanding life. In this respect, even Thomas Docherty, in arguing precisely for a reconsideration of the aesthetic value of art, vigorously reasserts the importance of play. Already for Schiller, he makes clear, play and the "play-drive" – der Spieltrieb – was central to aesthetics. For Schiller, explains Docherty, the play "regulates the opposition in our consciousness between the two competing drives of 'sense' and of 'form'" (Docherty 30), i.e. between sensibility and reason, between particulars and universals. In other words, play becomes a fundamental cognitive activity by means of which we can approach life and appreciate a work of art.

What I read in Brooke-Rose is thus an attempt to return to and reaffirm the "singularity" of literature. Anticipating the claim of the New Aestheticism, she suggests that art is *irreducible* to any kind of sociological or political ideology. She thus refutes the nihilistic (value negating) aspect of the postmodern debate and reaffirms the aesthetic in a different way and to a different end than postmodernism.

In "The Literature of Exhaustion", Barth praises Borges' accomplishments and admires in particular his story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*". Barth's words, in my view, perfectly apply to Brooke-Rose's *Thru* and sum up what I hope I have demonstrated as the main achievement of the novel. In fact, I believe that Brooke-Rose's "artistic victory, if you like, is that [s]he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (Barth 1967

31). As opposed to the dead end of “crisis thinking” and impossibility of representation of much postmodernist theories, Brooke-Rose reaffirms the role of language and the value of the aesthetic in a more enabling and positive (playful) way. In the face of the postmodern despair about the collapse of universal truths, Brooke-Rose stresses the importance of *literature as literature* and reinstates its cognitive value. She therefore avoids the ultimate collapse into nihilism which the main tenets of postmodernism, interpreted in a dogmatic and absolutist way, can generate. Rather than positing literature as merely collapsing into theories of textuality and representation, Brooke-Rose provides a constructive pathway for considering and appreciating the specificity of literary practice.

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* All works by Brooke-Rose ("Primary Texts") are listed by date of original publication. I have preferred to divide them into "Novels", "Short Fiction", "Poetry", "Criticism" and "Interviews with the Author". The books by other authors ("Secondary Texts") are listed by alphabetical order of authors and by date of publication of the edition used.

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